SHORT STORIES

No. 792. Week Ending March 5, 1904. Price One Penny.

WOULD HE BE IN TIME TO SAVE HER?

(A Thrilling Episode in the Dramatic Story, "Almost Too Late." See inside.)

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SHORT STORIES

No. 792.] Week Ending March 5th, 1904. [One Penny.

Containing the Incident Depicted on the Cover.

Reuben Howard sat before the fire, his pipe in his mouth, and gazed gloomily into the reddening embers. His dark face, always sullen and morose in aspect, seemed to-night even more unpleasant than was usual. The black, restless eyes had in them a look of sinister and bitter hatred—hatred against someone whose name he dared not breathe.

The outer door of the little cottage was suddenly flung wide open, and a man, whistling a merry country tune, came briskly into the room. He presented a striking contrast to the other, who still sat over the fire. And yet they were brothers.

Fair-haired, blue-eyed, and frank as the day, Horace Howard was universally regarded as the friend, the confidant, of all and sundry with whom he came in contact. Country matrons thought of him, and then of their daughters, and sighed. And as to the daughters themselves, sunny-hearted Horace Howard had wrought much havoc in more than one tender young heart—unwittingly, it must be admitted, and all unknown to himself, but wrought nevertheless.

The step upon the floor had evoked no movement from Reuben Howard. He did not so much as lift his dark eyes as his brother entered the room. Yet a strange restlessness seemed to pervade him, and a close observer might have detected a certain nervous alertness in his attitude that, as yet, was unaccounted for.

Horace drew a chair near his brother's, and seated himself before the fire. For some time he was silent. But at last he said:

"Reuben, I've a bit of news for you. I don't suppose you'll be very much surprised."

Reuben fidgeted slightly in his chair, but he did not speak, so Horace continued:

"You have, no doubt, guessed already who, among our many fair neighbours, has attracted me most. I met Grace Hazel by the stile in the meadow this evening, and she has promised to be my wife. As to my own feelings—well, they are better imagined than described."

He broke off with a short little laugh. The tone was light, yet it was more than evident that he was stirred by strong emotion, which the tone was intended to cover. There was a tender, happy light in the frank blue eyes that told infinitely more than the words he had uttered how ardently he had desired that which he had now won.

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For a moment there was silence between the two. Horace looked towards his brother in some surprise. Reuben slowly removed the pipe from his mouth, and, still without lifting his eyes from the fire, said in a low, constrained tone:

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure. Suppose I must congratulate you? Does she—er—think of you as—as you do of her?"

His voice grew suddenly hoarse, and he cleared his throat. But he said no more. Horace regarded him a little uneasily. What had come over his brother? He was always sullen and morose, it was true, but he had expected a little better feeling than Reuben had as yet displayed. The question, too, was queer. He might have taken that for granted.

"Well," responded Horace, "I should think you might guess that much from the fact of her having accepted me."

Reuben's lip curled disdainfully.

"It does not follow," he said cynically. "You are good-looking, strong, tolerably well-off, and—steady. A matter-of-fact girl would consider these things before the mere question of love. Grace Hazel is no fool, and it is quite possible——"

But Horace stopped him.

"Enough of this," he said shortly. "I am sorry to find you in this mood, to-night of all nights. But, since you ask, I will admit that Miss Hazel is actuated by no such mercenary or coldly-calculating motives as you imply. I have her own words to testify to the truth of this assertion." And a glad little smile came into his face as he let his thoughts go back to that meeting by the stile not more than an hour before, when Grace had confessed her love to him and promised to be his wife.

Reuben lifted his dark eyes for an instant and caught the look. When he again turned his face to the fire it was blacker and more sinister than before. Horace rose and pushed back his chair.

"I'll just run over to the mill," he said. "I expect Tom Hardy's gone home by now. The old mill's having plenty of work lately. There's been a fresh breeze all the evening, and we can do with it, for there's grain enough to grind for the next two months."

He put on his hat, and, whistling as he went, again left the house. As soon as he was gone, Reuben rose, tossed his pipe viciously on to the table, and began to stride savagely up and down the room.

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"So you've won, have you?" he muttered, clenching his hands together and shaking them at the door through which his brother had gone. "For years you've thwarted and baulked me in every conceivable way. I have been the foil to show off your qualities, your virtues, your excellences. The memory of my dead father is hateful to me, because, when he yet lived, he favoured you, and not me. And now—now you have snatched from me the jewel I have coveted so long, so ardently, and I must stand aside and see it done. She who but yesterday smiled at me and made hope leap up within me till I thought I should have fallen. And she told you she—loved you—loved you!"

Passion had seized him now. His whole frame quivered with strong excitement. He tottered, rather than strode, across the floor. His black eyes blazed, his mouth hardened, his brow darkened. For the time being Reuben Howard was a veritable maniac.

Presently he controlled his outward agitation and once more sat down before the fire. But a glance into his dark face revealed the fact that passion still raged within. Evil thoughts chased each other madly through his disordered brain. He must find a way to prevent his brother's marriage with Grace Hazel. He would try persuasion, pleading, intreaty, not with Horace, but with Grace herself. He would humble himself, even abase himself before her. And then, if that failed, he would threaten.

Meanwhile Horace was walking briskly through the meadows towards the mill, of which he and his brother were owners. It was not yet late—barely half-past nine—and darkness had not long settled down on the quiet earth. Presently he reached the stile where, less than an hour before, Grace and he had whispered their first words of love. He was just about to mount it and cross to the opposite meadow where the mill stood, when he noticed a slim white figure close by. Turning quickly, he peered into the darkness. Then he stepped forward with a glad little cry.

"Why, Grace," he said, taking both her hands in his, "not gone home yet, dear? Is anything the matter?"

The girl lifted her blue eyes to his. The look they gave him thrilled him through and through.

"Oh, no!" she said softly. "It is only that I am very very happy—so happy that I cannot go home just yet. The night is very lovely, and I feel so loth to dispel the influence—the spell—that is upon me. It seems a new world to-night, Horace."

The young man stooped and kissed the upturned face.

"Am I in the new world, darling?" he asked tenderly.

Grace lowered her blue eyes, and the small hands trembled in his.

"You are king of it," she said shyly. "You are even more than that, for you have created it."

Horace bent his head. For a few moments there was a deep hush, and then he said reverently:

"May God help me to be worthy of your love, Grace, since it is only by my worthiness that this new and wonderful world of which you speak can endure through the years that are to come. Would that men might realise this. So long as men are good, and true, and loyal, so long will the women who love them be pure and sinless as the angels of God."

A gust of wind swept by and the girl looked up.

"I suppose I must go home," she said. "Have you told Reuben yet about—about our engagement?"

She blushed as she used the word, and Horace smiled down at her.

"Yes," he replied. "I told him not more than a quarter of an hour ago."

Under cover of the darkness he took her in his arms and kissed her. Then he put her down and watched her as she went across the meadow. When she was out of sight he mounted the stile and went swiftly over the smooth sward towards the distant mill.

* * * * *

It was a month later, and they were still busy at the mill. The surrounding farmers had brought in their corn, and the great, tireless sails of the old mill moved majestically round and round like some great aerial monster. It wa now mid-day, and the hands had gone to dinner. The two brothers were on the point of following their example when a messenger brought a note and handed it to Reuben. The latter glanced at the superscription and passed it on to his brother.

"It's for you," he said shortly. "Looks like Farmer Wood's handwriting."

Horace tore open the envelope and took out the letter it inclosed.

"Dear Horace," it ran, "Can you oblige me by coming here without delay? The matter is of the utmost importance, or I should not ask it. Don't stop for dinner. You can have some here. Please don't refuse.—Your sincere friend,

"John Wood."

"I wonder what's in the wind?" mused Horace as he passed the letter back to his brother for him to read. "However, I can't refuse, so here goes."

He hastily exchanged his miller's cap for an out-door one, thrust his arms into his coat, and hurried off. Reuben watched him as he went with great swinging strides across the meadow.

"One fool hoodwinked," he muttered. "Well, half-an-hour's walk will cool his heels. Now I've got the mill to myself for a little while." And he smiled darkly to himself as he added the last words.

Then he turned to the boy who had brought the note, and who still remained at hand.

"Wait a minute, Davie," he said, and, turning, went into the mill and up to the deserted desk.

Taking a sheet of paper from the rack, he began to write, not in his usual hand, but in imitation of his brother's.

"My Darling Grace—*Can you come to the mill at once? I have something very important to tell you. Don't delay an instant, but come. Yours always.*—"Horace."

Finishing the note, he put it into an envelope and directed it.

"Take this to Miss Hazel at once," he said to the boy. "Don't hang about on the way, and don't wait for an answer. As soon as you've delivered it, run off home to dinner. If you're quick, I'll give you a shilling."

The boy took the letter, and, waiting to hear no more, darted off. When he had disappeared Reuben Howard returned to the mill.

"It's lucky I've got the knack of copying handwriting," he said with a mirthless laugh. "I fancy I shall be able to persuade the lovely Grace into taking me for a husband instead of that school-boy brother of mine. If not, I'll use a novel argument."

A sinister gleam shone in his dark eyes, and he paced restlessly to and fro the floor. The past month had wrought some change in his face. It was not only morose, not only sullen now. It was diabolical. Had a brain specialist looked into those glittering dark eyes, he would have stated his opinion that the man was on the brink of madness. They shone with a lustre until now subdued, as though the fire that still burnt fiercely in his breast sent forth its flames to light them, too, and mount, perchance, even to his very brain.

Slowly he began first to ascend the stair of the mill to the store-room above, and then the long ladder that led up to the great iron wheels and revolving rods of the moving mill. Reaching the top, he put out his hand and slipped a strong iron tongue into the thick cogs of the main wheel. There was a sudden jar, and instantly the great mill stood still.

He descended to the road again.

Not a soul was in sight, save for a fluttering white dress far across the second meadow. An ugly smile came into Reuben Howard's face as he saw it. Turning, he looked upward at the great mill-sails. One had stopped almost directly over the doorway of the mill. He propped a ladder against the wall, so that it reached the end of the lower sail. Once more he glanced across the intervening stretch of meadow. The fluttering white dress was nearer now. He watched it as it came over the stile and descended on the other side. Then he disappeared into the mill, and, stationing himself behind the wide-open door, silently waited.

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A step on the roadway without, the gleam of a white dress through the chink of the door, and Grace Hazel, with flushed cheeks and fast-coming breath, stepped into the mill. The heavy wooden door slammed to, and the two were alone in the grey old building—face to face with each other.

"Good morning, Reuben," she said, timidly holding out her hand. "I have come to see Horace. He has sent for me. What is the matter?"

A frightened look was slowly creeping into the blue eyes. Reuben saw it and laughed a dry, mirthless laugh.

"Well, the truth is," he said, edging towards the closed door of the mill, "the letter you received was not from Horace at all, but from me."

"You!". Grace stared at him in dull surprise.

"Yes, from me. All's fair in love or war, they say, so I've sent the young idiot off on a wild goose chase, to give me an opportunity of talking with you. I needn't mince matters. You know quite well what I want—what I have wanted for years, but have been afraid to ask. I want you—you, Grace Hazel, for my wife—and—and I mean to have you."

For two or three minutes the girl stood as if spellbound, staring blankly into the dark face of the man before her. Presently she said:

"Reuben, don't you understand? Hasn't Horace told you? I thought——"

A flash of the dark, menacing eyes stopped her.

"All that goes for nothing," said Reuben positively. "He has stood in my way all my life. But there is an end to all things, and the end has been reached now. I mean to marry you, Grace, and will brook neither his nor any other man's interference."

A faint colour was coming into Grace Hazel's cheeks.

"You don't seem to consider me," she said, a little defiantly.

Reuben fixed a look upon her that chilled her very soul.

"Do you refuse to marry me?" he asked, and his voice sounded clear and hard.

"I do." The answer was low but quite distinct.

Grace took a step towards the door. But Reuben was between it and her.

"Listen," he said hoarsely, and the girl saw that he was trembling violently as though from strong excitement. "I will give you one more chance. If you then refuse, I—I will kill you. Will you have me?"

"No," she said. "Let me out of this evil place."

But the man heeded her not. With a swift spring, he had her in his strong arms, and she was on the floor of the mill. Thrusting his hand into the pocket of his coat, he drew out a piece of stout cord. With this he bound her two wrists together, leaving the ends of the cord dangling some six or eight inches beyond the twisted knots.

Then he lifted her in his arms and went towards the door. Opening it, he looked out. No one was in sight. Up the ladder with his struggling but helpless burden, till he reached the end of the great sail. And there he bound her by the cord that held her white wrists, and, descending, looked up at her with a hideous grin on his dark evil face. Cry after cry rang across the meadow, but not a soul responded. It was the hour of the mid-day meal, and no one was abroad. Reuben looked up at her as she hung, pale and trembling, from the end of the great sail.

"One more chance," he shouted. "If you won't marry me, I'll start the mill. Will you?"

"Oh, no, no, no! I can't, I can't! Oh, have mercy on me, Reuben! Think of Horace!"

Plunging into the mill, he sprang up the stairs, then up the top ladder, and forced the iron tongue from the cogs of the wheel. The machinery creaked and groaned. There was a faint sound of grinding from below, and the shadow of a great sail, slowly moving, fell upon the window. A shriek of despair rang through the air, and, with a laugh of hideous madness, Reuben rushed down the ladder and stairs and out across the smiling meadows.

And the great sails of the mill commenced to go slowly and majestically round. and, with them, that white unconscious figure, whose wrists were being slowly crushed by the tightening of the twisting cords.

But someone was racing through the meadow—his fair face pale and drawn, his blue eyes strained towards that pinioned figure on the mill-sail. By a lucky chance, he had met farmer Wood half-way between the mill and his house, and quickly learnt that he had been made the dupe of some, as yet, unexplainable plot. So he had hurried back, filled with an unknown fear, till the sight of that fluttering white dress up among the sails of the mill had sent his feet flying over the smooth green grass of the meadow. Who she was he knew only too well. How she came there, he did not stop to think. The sight of his brother, rushing, shrieking, out of the mill and across the meadow in the opposite direction struck him as strange.

His one thought was of her. Would he be in time to save her?

As he drew nearer, he saw she was unconscious. Each revolution of the great sails would give one more twist to the sharp thongs that bound her slender wrists. But a few, and the cord would cut its way deep into the fair white flesh till even the bones beneath would snap and the muscles sever. Oh, would he be in time?

Faster and faster he went—up the slope that led on to the roadway—then, with a half turn to the left, along the path to the door of the mill.

His knees shook and his breath came in choking gasps as he tore madly up stairs and ladder, till he reached the great revolving cog-wheel and laid his trembling hand on the iron tongue.

Then he glanced over his shoulder and out of the window. One sail came round. No, that was not the one. Another. No. Still another, and it came down more quickly than the others had done. There was a clank of iron, a scraping jar, a groan, and the great machinery came once more to a standstill. Down the ladder and stairs again, and out of the mill-door.

He had stopped the mill at the right moment, and she hung almost in the very spot where, a few minutes before, she had been bound.

The ladder was lying by, and Horace placed it against the wall and was up it in an instant.

A sharp cut with his knife, and the limp, unconscious figure slipped into his arms and across his stout shoulder. Tenderly he carried her into the mill and unfastened the cruel cords that bound her wrists. The tears were in his blue eyes as he saw those two deep-red wales upon the white flesh where the cords had tightened. A few more turns—perchance only one—and they would have cut into the fair wrists and roused her to consciousness with the increasing torture. Kissing her white, set face, he ran for water, and, returning, began the task of restoration.

It was some minutes ere she opened her blue eyes. When she did, her gaze rested on his anxious face, and she smiled. For a moment or two there was silence, and then Horace asked:

"Was it my brother?"

"Yes. Did you save me, dear?"

"Thank God, yes."

There was a sound of hurrying feet outside the mill. The door was pushed open, and two men rushed in. Seeing Horace they advanced.

"Mr. Horace," said one, "we're all sadly grieved to have to tell ye, but Mr. Reuben's jumped off the top of Eagle Crag into the sea. Old Mother Martin saw him do it, and she says he was a-shrieking like a madman."

Horace turned his face away. and the men slipped quietly out of the mill-door. Presently Horace turned once more to the girl by his side. She was not slow to respond. The poor bruised wrists were about his neck and tears of sympathy were in her eyes.

"Poor Reuben," she whispered. "Do not blame him, Horace. He was not in his right mind. Let us be kind to his memory."

Horace bowed his head.

"So long as I have you," he said tenderly.

Walter J. Mowbray.

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MISS WHITE.

A Story of Last Leap Year.

It was on a morning early in January eight years ago that my office boy—I beg his pardon, junior clerk—brought me her card, upon which was simply inscribed:

"Miss White."

"Some old frump," I thought to myself, "who wants to bring an action against her next-door-neighbour for calling her bad names over the back garden wall!" I should mention that I am a solicitor, with more prospects than clients.

"Show her in," I said.

A moment later when I looked up there stood before me one of the prettiest girls I had ever seen.

"Pray be seated," I exclaimed, rising in a hurry. Breach of promise flashed through my thoughts, but then no human man engaged to so pretty a woman would ever break it off. Tall, and strikingly handsome, she showed not a trace of want of self-possession. I am a bad hand at describing a beautiful girl, so can only say that I believe I fell in love with my unknown client then and there.

"What can I do for you?" I inquired.

"I want your advice, Mr. Tremaine," she began, in a low and pleasant voice, "and so that you can quite understand it, I will begin my story at the beginning. I was left an orphan when quite a baby, and have been brought up by an aunt. I am quite independent, however, having an income of four hundred a year, to which I succeeded two years ago. My aunt has one son, who, encouraged by her, pesters me with his attentions, and has now taken to threatening me. I do not want to marry him; I hate him!" she exclaimed determinedly. "I must tell you he is only twenty—three years my junior, and has been very much spoilt by his foolish mother. And now can you advise me?"

"I can certainly try and frighten him with a warning letter couched in legal phraseology," I said; "or you can have him prosecuted and bound over."

Miss White shook her head.

"No," she said, "not that."

"Shall I write to him?"

"Please. I have written down his name and the address."

"Of course," I said, as she rose to go, "you could retaliate by threatening to leave yourself. Why not do so?"

"I have done so, and it is useless. He only says he will follow me and shoot me."

"We can stop that bluster," I said; "I will write him a letter at once, which I think will have the desired effect."

My pretty client rose and smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Tremaine," she said, offering me her hand; "and what do I owe you, please?"

I didn't know what to say to this, and could only stammer something about leaving it for the present.

"But," she said, "I thought solicitors always charged six and eightpence for a consultation, and so much for every letter they wrote for you. You see, you are the first lawyer I have ever consulted."

She said this with so charming a smile that I fell more deeply in love with her than ever.

"We will see," I said, "what effect my communication has upon the gentleman. I assure you it is the usual custom."

My client put out her gloved hand, saying "Good morning," and I was left alone with my thoughts.

Somehow after she went work was very distasteful. I wrote to that young cub, her cousin (whose name, I should mention, was Arthur Thornton), a letter that I afterwards had reason to believe considerably alarmed that gentleman, and as I wrote it the pretty face of my new client seemed smiling at me from the chair in which she sat.

I was not a very young man, though a comparatively poor one. I was thirty, and some of my friends were kind enough to consider me good looking, and I wondered as I worked whether I should ever see Miss White again.

A fortnight later I dined with some very old friends in Kensington, whom I had known from boyhood. Almost the first person I saw on entering the room was my fair client. The recognition was mutual, and my heart gave a thrill of delight, for I fancied I saw a gleam of pleasure leap into her beautiful eyes as we were introduced.

"You appear to have met before," said our hostess, looking from one to the other. Miss White smiled.

"Only professionally, I am sorry to say," I murmured.

"Your letter has had the desired effect, Mr. Tremaine, but how long it will last it is difficult to say. Much to my relief, my cousin has been called out of town."

"Please rely upon me in every way," I said; and we drifted into unprofessional channels. To me Miss White seemed more charming than ever, and she was not only charming, but clever to boot. I fell deeper into the toils than ever, and mentally anathematised my hostess when she disturbed our *tête-a-tête* by bringing another guest to present to my companion.

"Oh, Forget-me-not," she said. "I want to introduce Mr. Clifford to you."

I fear I must have glared at Clifford by the way he looked at me. But I felt it.

He was, to a certain extent, a celebrity, having recently published a volume of third-rate poems, which had, through some freak of the public, run into a second edition. Miss White, knowing this, beamed upon him in a manner that in anyone else but herself I should have thought effusive. I left them discussing the art of minor verse; but, though I did not take her down to dinner, I had the felicity to sit next to her, which comforted me on the principle that half a loaf is better than no bread.

"May I venture to make what may seem an impertinent remark?" I said during dinner. "Mrs. Vere called you 'Forget-me-not.' What a very pretty pet name!"

Miss White's face dimpled all over.

"It is my Christian name," she said.

"Most charming and most appropriate."

"Everyone is kind enough to say so; but it was my mother's wish, and she died when I was three weeks old. After all, girls are christened 'Rose,' 'Violet,' and 'Lily,' so why not 'Forget-me-not'?"

"I consider it a most delightful name," I said, and, what was more, I meant it. That dinner was all too brief for my happiness. It made me mentally resolve to cultivate the friendship of the Veres far more than I had hitherto done. I went home to my dingy chambers feeling that my favourite flower in the world was the Forget-me-not, and I was deeply in love with my charming client.

* * * * * * *

The next morning at my office a disagreeable surprise was awaiting me. I received a visit from Mrs. Thornton, who, with unmeasured expressions of rage, demanded the reason of my interference with her son's love affair. I tried my best to

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calm the lady, expostulated with her, even attempted to reason with her, which was silly, because he who attempts to reason with an angry woman is not diplomatic. After a stormy quarter of an hour she flung herself out of the office in a towering passion.

"Here is a pretty kettle of fish," I thought to myself, ruefully. The next thing that would probably happen would be that the young gentleman himself would also come to my office and threaten to shoot me! I carefully observed the size of the office poker in the event of such a contingency. Making all due allowance for Mrs. Thornton's disappointment, I felt a deep and sincere pity for my client, and vowed to myself there was nothing in the world possible to be done that I would not do on her behalf.

Strange to say my fears were realised within a week. One morning a card bearing the name of "Arthur Thornton" was brought to me. Bracing myself for the encounter, I ordered him to be admitted. Judge of my surprise—he proved to be a thin, plain, undersized stripling, with a vacuous countenance and an expression upon it of more idiocy than cunning.

The only redeeming feature of his face was his eyes, which were black and malevolent. He carried a horsewhip in his hand, and his first words left me with very little doubt as to his polite intentions towards me personally.

"Your name is Tremaine, isn't it?" he demanded bluntly.

"It is," I said.

"I have come to horsewhip you!"

"I have come to horsewhip you!"

I smiled, and leant back in my seat, but I kept my eyes fixed upon him.

"My dear sir, gentlemen don't do these things. I presume you are a gentleman?"

"There's a jolly sight too much presumption about you, Mr. Tremaine! You have taken the liberty of interfering in my affairs, and I mean to make it very warm for you before I have done with you."

"Your cousin requested me," I said, "to write to you on her behalf. I did so, as her solicitor. I fail to see what right you have to dictate to me in the matter at all, Mr Tremaine, that's my candid opinion."

"Right!" he exclaimed, flourishing his horsewhip. He made a lunge at me with it, but I was a moment too soon for him, and though the tip of the cord grazed my cheek, it was in my possession, and Mr. Arthur Thornton was lying, dazed, on my office floor within the space of ten seconds. Tremaine is a Cornish name, and I had done a little wrestling in my youth.

"Get up, you cur!" I exclaimed, giving him a not very gentle kick.

He crawled to his feet, looking as though he could have killed me.

"You don't suppose this sort of tomfoolery will do your wooing any good, do you?"

He made as though to rush at me again, and I pinned him by both arms into an easy chair like a baby.

"Don't be a fool!" I said curtly, "unless you want me to send for the police, which I certainly shall do if you dare to lay a finger on me. Now listen to me. Your cousin comes to me for my advice. I give it to her. She declines to marry you. That being so, there is no law in England by which you can make her change her decision. I know what both you and your mother want, and, as Miss White's solicitor, I am justified in telling you that I shall protect that young lady to the very utmost of my power."

He attempted to rise, his eyes burning with black hatred.

"Sit down!" I shouted, so loudly that my clerk, hearing, tapped at the door.

"It is all right, Jenkins; you can go away," I said; and turned my attention to Thornton again. He had sat down in the chair again.

"I haven't finished with you yet. What sort of man do you call yourself, not only to attempt to force a girl to marry you because she has money, but to be fool enough to try and take the law in your own hands? Are you aware I could prosecute you for attempted assault?"

"Where's your witness?" he muttered.

"In my possession," I said grimly, showing him the horse-

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whip; "and in my possession it will remain until you give me both an apology for your outrageous conduct and a written undertaking not to annoy Miss White after this date with your unwelcome attentions. Do this, and you can go; but you don't go till you do both. You're in a cleft stick, young man, and don't you forget it."

"I sha'n't!" he muttered sulkily.

"Jenkins," I shouted, "fetch a policeman."

The cub went white to the lips. There was a pause, during which I flourished the horsewhip ostentatiously. Jenkins tapped at the door and entered.

"Did you call, sir?"

"No," I said. "I thought I should want you, but I find I do not."

Jenkins' face when he caught sight of the horsewhip was a picture of astonishment, and for the sake of my own personal dignity, I felt compelled afterwards to explain matters to him to a certain extent. When he had retired, and closed the door, I faced my visitor once more.

"Now then," I said, "what are you going to do?"

My brave gentleman began to whimper, which was a good sign.

"Make out your paper," said he, with a poor attempt at bravado. I called Jenkins.

"Sit down, Jenkins, in my chair, and write as I dictate."

"I, the undersigned, hereby undertake never to molest or annoy Miss Forget-me-not White from this date. Should I do so, I leave it in the hands of Mr. H. Tremaine, solicitor, to prosecute me for an assault attempted to be committed by me upon him this day.—Signed."

"Now," I said, "get up and sign!" I still carried the horsewhip. With some hesitation Mr. Arthur Thornton rose to his feet and affixed his signature to the document. I promptly and dramatically locked it up in my safe.

"Jenkins, show this 'gentleman' out. His weapon is mine by right of conquest."

* * * * * * *

I did not see or hear anything of my pretty client for some time, beyond that we met at the Veres' one afternoon. I gathered from her manner then that she knew nothing of the encounter at my office. I had not supposed Mr. Thornton would tell her, and I certainly had no intention of doing so myself. She was, if possible, sweeter than ever, both kind and gracious to me, with the result that I went home in the seventh heaven of happiness.

But, alas! I awoke in the morning in the last depths of despair. Reason, they say, comes with the dawn. How could I, a struggling solicitor, barely able to earn a living, hope that "this one bright particular star" would deign to shine upon me? Forget her I never should. But I realised in the morning to the full my folly and presumption in having fallen in love with a rich woman. But all the same, I loved her, and I could not tear myself away from the Veres'. While reproaching myself for my folly, I still went there in the hope of meeting her, for I confessed to my secret heart that the world held but one woman for me, and that one woman was Forget-me-not White.

But one morning, at the end of February, I was sitting in my office surrounded by dingy parchments, through which seemed to shine the face of the woman I loved. History repeated itself, and Jenkins brought me a card with the two words inscribed upon it, "Miss White." My heart leapt, and then went still a moment later. How foolish of me, I thought. Of course she had only thought of me as a client. Of course I was bound to see her.

She entered, gracious and beautiful, and gave me her little gloved hand, then sat down in the very chair in which she had sat before.

"You are very unkind, Mr. Tremaine," she said with a delicious smile. "You have never been to see me." I stammered something about being busy, and she laughed the merriest laugh that surely ever a solicitor's office rang with.

"I have some news for you," she said. "My cousin has gone abroad. He sailed for New Zealand on the *Orinoco* yesterday. And before he went he made me a confession."

I started. What had he told her? I soon knew. My client put out her two hands to me, and I could almost have sworn there were tears in her eyes.

"Thank you, Mr. Tremaine, with all my heart, for what you have done for me!"

I would have given all I possessed in the world to have taken her in my arms and kissed her. I pressed her outstretched hands, and let them fall as quickly as possible.

"Don't look so serious," she said gaily; "I too have a confession to make." Here she hesitated a little, and I fancied I saw a blush creep over her face.

"A confession?" I echoed.

"Yes, a confession," she said. "I am thinking of getting married."

"I congratulate him," was all I could find to say.

"But you don't even know his name."

"Whoever he is, he will be lucky who wins you."

"Mr. Tremaine, I really believe you hold a very high opinion of me." The temptation was too great for me.

"I think you the most beautiful and lovable woman in the world," I said with emphasis.

Her face went as red as a rose.

"But," she said, "you haven't inquired the name of the gentleman I think of marrying."

"I would rather not know," I exclaimed. "I love you too much, but I shall pray for your happiness ever and always. Forgive me for having said so much, but I could not help it."

She gave me an adorable smile.

"If you will give me a sheet of paper and a pencil," she said, "I will sit at your desk, if I may, and write the name down for you to read when I am gone."

She sat in my chair and pushed away the parchments that littered the table.

"What a dreadful muddle!" she said. "You want someone to come and tidy it up."

My heart was beating so fast that I could not speak. She picked up a pen and wrote a name upon the sheet of paper I had given her. Then she looked up at me with a bright face.

"What is the date?" she said.

With a glance at my calendar I told her.

"There," she said, folding it carefully; "now I must go. Promise me that you will not look at that for an hour."

"I promise," I said, feeling somewhat mystified. She held out her hand to me.

"Good-bye," I said.

"*Au revoir*," was her reply, and before I knew it she was gone.

* * * * * * *

An hour later I looked at the paper. To my utter amazement it bore nothing but my own name, Harry Tremaine, and the date, February 29th. It flashed upon me with a suddenness that almost unnerved me, that the year was leap year, and that Forget-me-not White had proposed to me!

She is now Forget-me-not Tremaine, and vows that in all the eight years of our happy married life she has never once regretted that proposal of hers. The sheet of paper on which she wrote my name hangs framed in my study.

Clifton Bingham.

A HANSOM CAB AND A HORSE
are offered
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See This Week's "BIG BUDGET."

ONE PENNY.

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OF WHOM YOU READ.

Vivienne D'Alton, the decoy. She, an innocent girl, unwittingly leads young gentlemen of good social standing to their ruin at the hands of her father.

Beverley D'Alton, who poses as a millionaire who has made his money by judicious speculation. He assumes to lavish great affection on his daughter, from whom he has been separated for many years.

Mrs. Sherwood. A florid person, who is introduced to Vivienne by her father as a great friend of her dead mother. She lives with the D'Altons, and requests Vivienne to call her "Aunt Flora," which the young girl reluctantly does.

Annchen. A lady's maid, whom Vivienne greatly detests. She seems to be on very familiar terms with Mrs. Sherwood and Mr. D'Alton.

NINTH EPISODE.

A Letter from Viscount Broomville.

As soon as I reached my own rooms with the two letters I had secured, I locked the outer door behind me, sat down, and made myself mistress of the information intended for me.

The first letter I opened was from Sophie Melrose it ran:

"My Dear Miss D'Alton, "*It was exceedingly kind of your father to arrange all about the Specialist so promptly, though I must confess we should have been a little more grateful if we could have seen you before we left. But there was not even time to come round and inquire how your sprained ankle was getting on, for as the Specialist is leaving England to-morrow, not a moment is to be wasted. I am so thankful that you mentioned poor Alan's affliction to your father, whose kindness, in taking all the worry of arranging things off our hands, has won our everlasting gratitude, even if the great Specialist to whom he had wired instructions should not be as successful as is hoped. To-night, after he has seen Alan, I will write again, and let you know what he says.*

"*Meanwhile, I am,*

"*Yours gratefully and affectionately,*

"Sophie Melrose."

Was I very much amazed at the contents of this letter? I fancy not. But I was certainly distressed, for it is a terrible thing to have such doubts as mine resolved into certainties, and the missive, which Annchen was on the watch to intercept, told me a multitude of things.

It told me, for instance, that there had been a conspiracy to prevent me seeing the Melrose family again, and that the pretended appointment at the office was merely a ruse to keep me out of the way while my father posed as Alan's Good Samaritan. It also told me that Annchen had overheard my conversation with Sophie and that she had reported it verbatim. And, still more frightful revelation, it told me that my anxiety concerning the origin of Alan Melrose's brain trouble was only too well founded.

This being so, how could I hope that anything but evil was at the bottom of the hasty removal of the patient, or that such a person as the vaunted "Specialist" really existed? No wonder I scented danger. And no wonder that I was wildly anxious to warn the deluded victims against the enemies who were plotting their ruin.

Only too certain was I now that, if my father could prevent it, Alan Melrose would never recover his memory. For, if he did, he would be able to tell what he had done with the missing £80,000. I could have solved that mystery myself, in the light of what had happened to-day. Or, rather, I could feel sure in my own mind concerning it. But actual disclosure ought to come from the victimised man himself, and, dreadful as it would be for me, I felt that I should be compelled to indorse the proclamation of my own father's villainy!

But how to warn the Melroses that it was an enemy, and not a friend who was directing their movements, and raising hopes that were never intended to be fulfilled? There was no mention of the name of the place to which they were journeying, so I had no immediate means of communication with them. True, Sophie had promised to write again as soon as she reached her destination. But would she be in a position to do so? And even if she were successful in dispatching another letter to me, was it not probable that it would be intercepted?

I was now face to face with the fact that my relatives were nothing better than a gang of unscrupulous schemers; so, painful as it was to take sides against my own father, the only course open to me was to fight him and Mrs. Sherwood with their own weapons, and, for the present at least, to put on a mask of unsuspecting amiability.

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If possible, I must devise a means of preventing the withholding of letters intended for me, and I was trying to form a plan in that connection, when my eyes lighted upon the other missive which I had rescued from Annchen's clutches. I was both amazed and relieved when I read it—amazed at its contents, and relieved to know that its writer was safe.

For it came from Viscount Broomville, and this is what it said:

"Dear Miss D'Alton,—*If I were to tell you one half the things that have befallen me since you saved my life at Knightsbridge, you would hardly believe me to be speaking the truth. Many reasons have induced me to risk writing to you now, for the time has come when you ought to be warned that your own life and liberty are no safer than mine have been for the last few weeks. Never mind how I know this. And, for Heaven's sake, do not run away with the idea that I exaggerate the gravity of the situation. Be on your guard. Go nowhere without other escort than that of your relatives. And beware of taking food and drink that is not shared by them. If this letter reaches your hands, it may save you from danger. If it does not, it will be because restraint is being exercised upon your correspondence; so I warn Mr. D'Alton and Mrs. Sherwood that if any harm befalls Miss D'Alton, there are those who will avenge her at once. The former is the instigator of several attacks upon myself, and I am simply biding my time before I declare all I know. If that time is hastened by any doubt as to the continued welfare of Vivienne D'Alton, the first to bring her enemies to justice will be her ardent well-wisher,*

"Broomville."

So Viscount Broomville guessed the real nature of the great millionaire, too! And his fears were so strong on my behalf that he found it necessary to send me a warning which would have seemed preposterous if my own suspicions had not been already aroused. Indeed, he had so worded his letter that whether it reached me or not, it was calculated to be of good service to me, although it was hard to believe that my own father would do me an injury, for the fact remained that he had heaped pleasures and luxuries upon me ever since I came home from school.

"Please, miss, the master sent me to see if you were coming down to tea."

Annchen's voice, respectful but penetrating, was making itself heard on the other side of the locked door, and, thrusting the two letters into my pocket, I rose and turned the key.

"How long has Mr. D'Alton been in?" I inquired, with surprising nonchalance, considering the anxiety of mind I was in. Nor would one have imagined that there had been a rather unpleasant incident between the girl and myself, unless the fact that she was even more deferential than usual argued increased hypocrisy.

"Only a few minutes, miss," she answered. "He told me to say that he had good news about some friends of yours."

Without questioning the necessity of sending a message like this, I quietly went down to the drawing-room, and found both my father and Aunt Flora beaming with good nature.

"There, my dear," chuckled the former, "confess that I stole a nice march upon you this morning!"

"So I fancy. You never intended to join us at the office," was my steady reply.

"Certainly not! It was all a scheme to get you out of the way, while I packed off young Melrose and his sisters to interview a specialist in mental ailments who intends leaving the country almost immediately. I fervently hope that the poor fellow will come back cured, if only for my own sake."

"For your sake? How can it affect you?"

"My dear child, it is a matter of £80,000. Alan Melrose had made every preparation for investing that sum in one of my companies when this strange mental darkness overtook him. Meanwhile, he has deposited the securities somewhere, and they will probably remain safely hidden in some queer place until he recovers his memory. So, you see, it is greatly to my interest to expedite his recovery."

So there was no secrecy about the matter at all! Could it be possible that my mind was warped, and that I twisted every trivial circumstance into an indication of evil? My father's candour simply bewildered me, and he answered one or two more questions of mine quite frankly the while we took our seats at the table, being for a wonder without any guests.

"Bryce brought you straight home instead of taking you to see Clarissa Greatham? Of course he did. He had my orders to that effect, for I wanted you to be home in good time, so that I could tell you all about the Melrose plans before you got uneasy. They should be in Edinburgh in time to let you have a letter by to-morrow morning. Miss Melrose promised to write to you, and I suggested that she should wire on arrival."

Really, if it had not been for Viscount Broomville's letter, I should almost have felt ashamed of my dreadful suspicions. But I felt it rustle in my pocket as I happened to withdraw my pocket handkerchief and I was instantly reminded of the warning: "Be on your guard. Go nowhere without other escort than that of your relatives. And beware of taking any food and drink that is not shared by them."

"Vivienne, my child, you look quite done up, and you are eating nothing," observed my father, looking anxiously into my face. "Drink your tea; it will do your good."

While I had been toying with the food on my plate and meditating on Lord Broomville's letter, my father had been kindly thinking of my welfare, and I was mechanically about to lift the cup of tea to my lips when I happened to glance up at Mrs. Sherwood, who had sweetened it for me. Her eyes were sparkling with anticipation, her lips were parted eagerly, and there was altogether such a strange look upon her face as could only be produced by the expectation of something unusual.

Crash!

The tea-cup slipped from my nerveless fingers, and the contents were spilt on the dainty costume that had been donned for the first time that day.

"I'm so sorry," I murmured between lips that I knew to be ashy pale. "I'm afraid my frock is quite spoilt. It was very clumsy of me."

"And clumsiness isn't exactly in your line, eh?" sneered Mrs. Sherwood, who was now looking like a baffled demon. "It isn't always wise to overwhelm girls with luxuries. It makes them extravagant and careless."

"Flora, how dare you talk so foolishly? Can't you see that the child is quite ill? I've noticed once or twice that you felt spiteful towards her, but I thought you had more sense and more feeling than you are showing now."

My father had evidently lost his temper, for his voice rang out so angrily that every word must have been heard by the two men who waited upon us. Mrs. Sherwood immediately began to protest that she had not meant to be ill-natured, but I did not wait to hear the argument finished. I was almost hysterically overwrought, and, bursting into tears, I hastily made my way back to my own rooms.

* * * * *

After I had recovered my composure, I tried to realise my exact situation. In the eyes of the world, I was the petted and only child of a millionaire whose name was a household word, and who was credited with being one of the most charitable men alive.

As such I was a girl to be envied, for very few could hope to attain the pinnacle of happiness and prosperity upon which I was supposed to be securely placed.

But, in the quiet of my own room, I saw a very different picture. I was one of the most unhappy of mortals, for I must either share the awful guilt which cast its shadow about me, or I must denounce my own father as a cheat, a thief, and possibly, though I tried hard not to believe it, a murderer!

No wonder I was in a state of extreme nervous tension. And no wonder that I feared attempts upon my own life, now that I had shown myself to be so uncomfortably observant as to be a dangerous companion if only one-half of my suspicions were true.

Was there a drug of some sort in the tea which I had deliberately wasted? Or was my imagination really running away

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with me? If the former, how was I to escape other attempts upon my life or sanity? Lord Broomville, whose letter I carefully burnt, had warned me against the possibility of foul play. But how was I to avoid it as long as I remained an inhabitant of Park Lane?

This question set me thinking in another direction. I would run away and watch from a safe distance the disentanglement of the mysteries which nearly drove me distracted.

Fired with this idea I began to gather my jewellery together. It was very valuable, for costly presents had been simply heaped upon me, and I knew that it would yield me plenty to live upon until matters were solved one way or the other.

But I was not yet destined to carry out my intentions, for without even a preliminary knock, Mrs. Sherwood entered my boudoir, being immediately followed by my father and a gentleman whom I did not know.

"Ah, in your bedroom, are you, dear?" called out Aunt Flora. "Do come here a minute, your father has brought someone to see you."

Hastily thrusting my jewel-case out of sight, I went into the boudoir, and bowed stiffly to the stranger who had so unwarrantably forced himself upon my notice. I was feeling very mutinous, and very determined to show my objection to this encroachment upon my liberty, so I looked the stranger none too amiably in the face. But, strange to relate, I no sooner met the steadfast glance of his piercing grey eyes than my own dropped obediently, and, much to my subsequent amazement, I soon found myself agreeing with childish docility to the directions given me.

"I have brought Dr. Farnie to see you, Vivienne. Your nerves seem to be in a most extraordinary state, and I feel so anxious about you that I want you to describe your feelings and sensations to the doctor, so that he may know what to prescribe."

"There is no need to trouble your daughter," interrupted Dr. Farnie's voice, which was so gentle, so melodious, and so soothing, that it was a pleasure to listen to it. "I can see for myself what is the matter. She is nervous and overwrought, suffers from bad dreams, and is tormented by the malignant imagination that is such a frequent accompaniment of hysteria. But we will soon change all that. Less excitement, earlier hours, and fresh air, instead of heated rooms, will work wonders, and a simple tonic will do the rest."

"Nay, doctor, I think you exaggerate the case," remonstrated my father, who, as he sat in a big armchair, and looked with tender solicitude at me, appeared to be the personification of benevolence. "My daughter is certainly a bit hysterical, for, as I have already told you, she burst into tears because she accidentally spoilt a new dress. But she has shown no signs of being troubled by a malignant imagination, and——"

"Pardon me, I think you will find my diagnosis correct," was the firm reply. "I have had much experience with hysterical girls, and by far the most painful part of their malady is their tendency to create troubles that do not exist. Why, I knew one poor girl who actually imagined that her own mother was conspiring to murder her."

"Incredible!" exclaimed my father.

"Awful!" added Mrs. Sherwood.

And I? Well, it must be owned that Dr. Farnie's words and manner exercised such an influence upon me that I, for the time being, thankfully believed myself to be the victim of painful delusions, and cast aside the awful suspicions which had begun to make life a torment to me.

"The doctor is right," I murmured shamefacedly. "I've thought all manner of dreadful things, and my day-dreams seem to have been worse than those I have dreamt while asleep."

My father, and the doctor, and Mrs. Sherwood all smiled at me, and the doctor said kindly: "After all, Miss D'Alton, you are not so far gone in hysteria as the other young lady I mentioned, for a patient no sooner awakes to a conviction that her fancy has been playing her tricks than she is on the high road to recovery. And now to begin my treatment. Suppose Miss D'Alton goes for a drive at once, in an open carriage for the sake of the fresh air, and, while she is out, let her call at whichever chemist she prefers, and ask him to give her a bottle of Campbell's Nerve Tonic. It is a patent medicine, but it is as good as anything I can give her myself, and the mere fetching of it will benefit her."

I smiled gratefully at the doctor, for I guessed why he wanted me to fetch the remedy myself. A patent medicine in a sealed bottle could not possibly have been tampered with by anybody, and there was not even room left to imagine an intentional curb on my liberty when Aunt Flora observed: "Well, I'm glad it's something she can look after herself, for I don't want to go out again before dinner if I can help it."

I protested that there was no need for anyone to accompany me, and when, after the others had left me, Susan came in to help me to dress for the carriage, I almost felt happy again.

"Campbell's Patent Nerve Tonic" proved very difficult to procure. The first shop at which I called had never heard of it, but an assistant at the second shop thought he could get me a bottle of it the following day. I gave him an order for a supply, and then, being desirous of removing all my delusions as soon as possible, I gave the order to drive to a shop near the Haymarket.

Each time the footman saw me into the carriage again, and then mounted the box beside Bryce. It was pleasant to know that I could go where I liked without fear of restraint, and my spirits had been raised so much that I even looked forward with pleasure to the little dinner-party which was to take place at our house that night. The guests had all been invited by my father, and I had not even asked their names. But, by way of making up for previous disinclination to entertain guests I resolved to be very amiable, and was smiling with anticipatory pleasure when I again left the carriage in quest of the "Nerve Tonic."

"Had I better go into the shop, miss?" inquired the footman. "There's a perfect crowd outside."

So there was, but I saw that it was easy to pass it, and was about to do so when, moved by some central impulse, the crowd parted, and I saw in its midst the pathetic figure of an old lady whose face was the picture of misery, and whose hands were outstretched pleadingly to a big policeman who was keeping the crowd from pushing her about.

"You don't know who you are, madam? And you don't know where you live? Nor remember nothing at all about yourself?"

The policeman was putting these questions kindly enough, when a tall, foreign-looking man came forward, and said eagerly: "Ah, there she is! Poor old thing! I thought we had lost her again!"

"Why, do you know her?" inquired the policeman, and the man answered promptly: "Know her? Of course I do! Why, she's my mother's sister. But she's a bit off in her upper storey, and gives us heaps of trouble."

"Well, you had better see her safe home before she comes to grief."

The old lady looked at the man who claimed to be her nephew, and shrank back. "I don't know him!" she protested. "He is strange to me!"

"Yes, it's hard luck when you forget your own relations. But come along, Aunt Jane. It's time you were having a good feed at home."

The policeman stepped back, and the stranger was grasping the old lady's hand to take her away with him, when I sprang forward to prevent this being done.

For whether I was the victim of malignant fancies or not, I was certain of this: The old lady who had lost her memory was she who claimed to be Miss D'Alton, and the man who posed as her nephew was the "Bird of Evil Omen."

(Another instalment of this exciting series next week.)

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THE FALSE FRIEND.

Telling how he Wronged a True Man, and how he Met His Just Reward.

As Laurence Warner stepped forth from the shade of the trees, he caught sight of the low cottage in the centre of the grassy glade, and suddenly stopped. An involuntary cry broke from his lips.

"Is *this* the place?" he murmured sadly. "Is it here that Annie Metherell, the delicately-nurtured and pretty beauty of Wilmington, now drags through the dark days of an embittered and joyless life? And yet, however unwillingly, I was one of those who wrought this evil. Why, indeed, have I ventured here? Through your long silence, why has the voice of hope ever made itself heard in my heart? It is because, perhaps, you are life itself to me. It may be, love, that once again you will listen to my pleading."

The warm flush of hope mounted to his pale, marble-like features. He threw back his handsome, fair head, and cast a rapid glance about him.

It was a wild and lovely scene, that which met his gaze. On his left moved the dark, slow waters of the river, bathed now in waves of amber light from the rising sun. Round about, rising from the wind-stirred reeds as from a floor of emerald, were numbers of oaks, draped from the crown to the lowest bough in a floating web-work of moss, that glistened in silvery greenness beneath the dew of early morning.

The glade before him was carpeted with a grass that, growing in thick tufts, with outward falling blades, seemed at a little distance an expanse of green tulips.

In the centre of this expanse a column of blue smoke rose slantingly into the air; it curled from the chimney of the cottage referred to above.

Besides the smoke and a white curtain hanging before the window that looked towards Laurences Warner, no signs of human occupancy were visible.

These details he had taken in with that single sweeping glance.

Hesitating a moment, his hand, resting on the trunk of an oak, shook slightly, and into his dark eyes came a look of longing that was deep unto pain; then, crossing the glade with swift steps, he approached the door of the low building and rapped upon it.

Light footsteps sounded within; the door swung open and a woman—a girl, rather—appeared on the threshold.

A slender figure, lithe as that of a leopardess in its perfect grace; a face dusky, dreamful and weirdly sad; with star-like eyes; a cloud of hair, dark as the gloom of a starless tropical midnight, falling over the shoulders in thick waves.

On seeing her—this young and glorious creature—Laurence Warner, uttering a low, glad cry, involuntarily stretched forth his hands.

"Annie," he breathed, "Annie Metherell!"

She echoed his cry. Her face grew wan with a mysterious anguish. Recoiling from him, as if in fear, she reeled.

"Laurie! Oh, Heaven! Why do you come here?"

An expression of bitter disappointment darkened his face; yet the hunger in his grey eyes deepened.

He came closer to her, and would have taken her hands in his; but, with an imperious gesture, she checked him.

"Why," he repeated, "have you only such words as those for me? Oh, my love, what have I done to merit them?"

A vague, shrinking wonder looked at him out of those great magnetic orbs. Her nervous lips curled with a faint, scornful smile.

"Need you ask me, Mr. Warner? What is Annie Metherell—friendless, beggared—to you?"

"To *me?* My life, my love, my all!"

She drew her breath sharply.

"Hush! Have you come to deride me? Are you a demon, that you approach me after what has passed? And yet"—her voice sinking into the plaintive minor key of regret—"I once loved you."

"*Once*, Annie? I do not understand. You bewilder me! Tell me, dearest, what you mean."

The pleading music of that voice seemed to shake her very soul. A convulsive tremor ran through her frame.

"Laurence," she prayed, "have pity on me! I am weak—oh, so weak!—and the memories of the past still live to mock me. Leave me, I beseech you, if you would not madden one whose heart you have almost broken."

"But, Annie——"

"Go!" she interrupted brokenly. "*Remember the grave in the veld.* and——"

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She checked herself with a low shriek. Her eyes had turned from Laurence to a third person who suddenly appeared upon the scene.

"Aye!" exclaimed a deep and menacing voice at the young man's side, "false friend, hypocrite, *murderer*, that you are, begone!"

With a start of surprise, a swift pallor of anger, an instinctive clenching of the hands, Laurence swung round.

An old man, clad in threadbare garments, but of an imposing and patriarchal beauty, stood before him. One arm was lifted, as he wildly waved him back from his child. Hair and beard of hoary whiteness streamed over his shoulders and breast. His deep-set eyes blazed with the half-mournful wrath of some great prophet of old.

Seeing him, the manner of Laurence instantly changed. His face softened, and a bewildered look crept into his eyes.

"Mr. Metherell!" he said.

The blaze in those grand eyes deepened.

"I!" he returned haughtily. "Now tell me why you have followed us here?"

A moment of silence.

Laurence looked at him with the expression of one who doubted the evidence of his own senses.

"I came," he said, at last, "to claim my promised bride."

A quick, desolate cry followed his words. The beautiful eyes of Annie Metherell were riveted upon him in a horror-stricken, yet fascinated, gaze.

"Too late!" she exclaimed, in a faint and moaning voice. "Heaven, be pitiful! *Oh, my brother—my brother!*"

Laurence listened as one in a stupor. His mind was in a whirl.

The old man stepped closer to his child, and spoke in a tone of ineffable tenderness:

"Go, dear one; this is no place for you. Leave me to deal with him."

She hesitated, shuddered, and, still gazing at Laurence, held forth her delicate hands beseechingly.

"Have mercy on us!" she whispered. "Remember, he is old, and he has been deeply wronged. Do not—please do not take from me the only creature that is left to love me!"

He did not answer her. A deathly paleness had drifted into his cheek, and his face sank upon his breast.

The old man spoke again.

"Go, Annie, and fear nothing. I will be with you soon."

She bowed her graceful head, with a last look at Laurence, and disappeared into the cottage, closing the door after her. Her lover had made no attempt to detain her. He now turned to Mr. Metherell.

"Perhaps you will condescend to explain," he said wearily. "You call me an assassin — she evidently deems me one. I do not understand. I have never injured either of you intentionally. Will you kindly enlighten me?"

The old man broke into a wild and hollow laugh.

"Is this your wish?" he asked.

His companion bent his head.

"Then it shall be gratified, Laurence Warner. When you accompanied Walter to his home in Wilmington, we welcomed you as a friend. That was six years ago. You remained with us until you won Annie's love, and, believing you a man of honour, I sanctioned your suit. But you betrayed the trust we reposed in you. The war breaking out, you went where duty called you. Before you left us, however, you begged Annie to communicate with you whenever it was possible. You, it was understood, would do the same. Did you keep your promise? She kept hers. She wrote you four letters."

Laurence could not repress a slight start.

"I never received any of them," he said simply.

The old man lifted one hand with a gesture of scorn and disbelief.

"Did you not? Nor did she receive any of *yours!*"

"Ah!" The white teeth closed on the gleaming, flossy moustache. "And yet," he murmured sadly, "her faith could not have been so small. There is more to tell, Mr. Metherell."

"*More!*" A groan broke from the old man's lips. "Wretch!" he cried. "If you knew—— But, stay! You shall be satisfied. See!"

He took from his pocket a folded and torn slip of paper, and held it towards Laurence in one shaking hand.

"Look," he continued hoarsely. "Those words were written by your victim as he was dying."

Laurence took the paper, and glanced rapidly over the

"Begone, false friend and murderer!" the old man cried.

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few words scrawled upon it. The writing had been done with a blunt instrument dipped in some darkened liquid. As he gazed upon it, he grew faint, and his heart seemed to pause in its beating. He read it once again.

"*Father, I am dying. Laurence Warner is my murderer, for I——*" (*a blur*), "*in bottle. I write this with my blood.*

"Walter Metherell."

The paper dropped from the young man's hand. His face was ghastly. A hunted, desperate look crept into his eyes.

"And you *believe* it?" he whispered, voicelessly. "In Heaven's name, tell me who gave you this?"

"It was found," returned the old man, in faltering tones, "clenched in Walter's stiffened hand. He who gave it to me buried my boy on the veld, the night that Jackson was slain."

"He who gave it to you!" repeated Laurence. "Old man, it was *I* who buried your son."

"*You?*" with a glance of loathing.

"Yes, I!" Laurence passionately replied. "I found him, as you say, on the veld. He had been shot down by some unknown person in the darkness. He breathed his last in my arms."

"Do you expect me to credit this?"

"Old man, you *must!* Merciful Heaven!" he cried, in a voice of horror. "How can I endure such a charge—I who am innocent?"

The words were scarcely spoken when the door near which he was still standing was thrown open, and Annie again appeared on the threshold.

Her glorious face was bathed in colour; her bosom heaved with excitement; her great glowing eyes gleamed like moonlit jewels.

"Father," she exclaimed, clasping her hands, while her sweet voice shook with emotion, "I was afraid, and, listening, I have heard all. I have heard and I believe. He could not—no, no, he could not have been guilty of this crime. Laurence," she continued, turning to him almost humbly, "you told me just before you left us, that you had a friend who would see that your letters reached me. You did not mention his name, and I forgot to ask you then. Who was that friend?"

A dim but sweet hope, awakened by her gentle words, stirred through his heart. He looked at her, however, with wondering eyes.

"He is known to you, Annie. His name is Eric Devine."

"I thought that it might be so," she whispered, with a start.

"Ah!" muttered her father wonderingly. "It was he who clung to us so faithfully through all our misfortunes. He is still our friend, poor Eric!—our only one, perhaps!"

"And," added Annie, in a hushed voice, "it was *he* who brought us the tidings of Walter's death."

Her eyes, as she spoke, met those of Laurence, and something in their expression caused the blood to leap more warmly through his veins, while his face kindled into an eager, waiting beauty.

But when she turned from him a moment later to her father, that expression changed. A quick pallor shot into her cheeks and her eloquent features, one moment a-quiver with joy, the next grew rigid with horror.

"Do you understand?" she asked.

The old man shook his hoary head.

"No, child. Tell me what you mean."

"You shall soon know, father. Heaven is merciful. It has heard my prayer. Laurence"—her tones lingered caressingly on that name—"when you buried Walter you found on his person a photograph—mine—and a package of letters from his betrothed, did you not?"

The articles in question were instantly laid in her hands. Involuntarily the three drew closer together. The flush of hope on the young man's face deepened.

With an impulsive movement, unnoticed by her father, Annie stretched forth her little hand and laid it on her lover's arm.

"Do you remember," she asked, "my brother's last words?"

"Only the substance," he replied, trembling like a woman beneath her touch. "He bade me tell the dear ones at home that he died a Christian, and that his last thoughts were of you and of her whom he so devotedly loved."

Tears rushed to the listeners' eyes.

She turned to her father, her voice faltering piteously:

"Look at him," she said. "Could Walter's murderer speak of him thus?"

The old man was staggered. He moved backward a step, an expression of bewilderment settling on his face.

Then the paper that Laurence had dropped caught his eye. He lifted his head and was about to speak.

Bang!

It was the sharp report of a gun among the trees.

It was instantly followed by a loud cry of pain. Then a white puff of smoke, curling upwards, slowly dissipated among the leaves.

The three, turning at first with one impulse in the direction of the sound, then looked at each other in mute inquiry.

Annie was the first to speak. Her face had grown white to the lips. The truth had suddenly flashed upon her mind.

"It is Eric Devine," she gasped. "He has shot himself, Laurie. It is the work of Nemesis. But come, let us go to him."

With the swift grace of a Diana, she crossed the glade and disappeared among the trees.

Laurence and her father followed more slowly. A low cry of pity came back to them through the sylvan silence. They had gained the edge of the glade.

They now pushed aside the rustling reeds, and looked upon a startling and mournful scene. A tall and nobly-proportioned man, in a dark shooting suit, lay prone upon the earth, in the shade of a huge oak, before them.

His gun rested near him, entangled among the reeds. His hat had fallen back from his brow, and a gleam of sunlight, stealing through the leaves and mosses above, played over his convulsed lips the brilliant mockery of a smile.

His head was supported by Annie, who knelt like an angel of mercy by his side. She had torn her handkerchief into strips, with which she vainly sought to staunch the blood that oozed from a round, dark hole in his breast.

Her face, bending above him, was now filled with the light of tenderest pity. She felt that this poor creature was dying.

He turned his head at the approach of Laurence and Mr. Metherell, and the glazing eyes, that had a moment before looked at Annie with such agonised intreaty, were fastened upon them.

"Laurence Warner!" he muttered, in a hollow voice. A scowl contracted his handsome brows. "Do you know," he said, "that the bullet which laid me here was meant for *you?*"

Mr. Metherell started, and Annie, with a faint cry, drew back.

But Laurence, bending over him, felt in that moment only a compassion for the dying one, and smiled.

"I believed it," he said.

"I was a false friend to you, Warner."

"Yes, I know it now."

"Still, I did not wish to be your foe, if my passion for Annie had not almost maddened me. You knew how I loved you?" turning to her.

"Yes," she answered, in a low voice. "But I kept the promise I gave you when I told you we could still be friends. I said nothing—not even to him."

A dim smile touched his lips.

"It is well. And now, as I have but a little while to live, I want to make a confession. Old man," he continued, addressing Mr. Metherell, "it was not Laurence Warner who killed your son."

"Villain!" he exclaimed involuntarily; while Annie, starting to her feet, uttered a cry of joy.

The fading eyes looked up at him imploringly.

"Do not curse me *now*—I cannot bear it. Listen to me. It was all a mistake. I meant to kill Warner. He was

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A NOVEL CONTEST FOR OLD AND YOUNG.

Full particulars will be announced next week of a splendid new competition for readers of "Short Stories."

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NEXT WEEK. NEXT WEEK. NEXT WEEK.

Remember that the competition starts next week, that is, in the issue of "Short Stories" dated March 12th. Do your friends a good turn by drawing their attention to that number, and place your order with your newsagent for your copy without delay in order to avoid disappointment.

£25 IN CASH PRIZES.

near our lines that night, and I thought he was seeking Walter. I followed him into a thicket, and lost sight of him. Soon after I heard someone approaching, and, thinking it was he, I fired. A cry—it was Walter's voice that uttered it—undeceived me. At the same time the moon came out from behind a cloud and shone on his face. Horrified, I turned and fled. When I ventured near the spot next day, I saw only a newly-made grave."

His voice had sunk almost to a whisper. Shudderingly, the three drew closer to catch his words. The old man broke the momentary pause.

"But the paper," he said, "with the words written on it in blood?"

"My work—mine," whispered the dying man. "The letters, too—I destroyed them—his, intrusted to me, and hers, obtained by treachery. I managed to prevent a meeting between him and Walter, until—until—— Laurence, where are you?"

"Here—here beside you, Eric."

"It grows dark—the night is closing in. I—I would pray; but it is useless. What was I saying? When I saw you just now, I knew that all my scheming had been in vain. Mad with jealousy, I was about to fire, when the gun became entangled among—Annie, Annie! Oh, pity me. It is cold; and the starless night—oh, God!"

At that desolate cry, she clasped her hands, and looked at Laurence. He, the wronged one, was blind with tears.

"Speak to him, child," he whispered. She sank upon her knees again, with a glance that thrilled him to the soul.

"I am here, Eric. Can you not see me? Do you not feel the touch of my hands?"

His mind wandered. A cry of horror broke from his lips.

"Do you not know the spot? There is the grave. See how wanly the moonbeams tremble over it. Hear the ghostly whisper of the midnight wind. Does it whisper to him? Will it rouse him from his dreamless slumber? Last night his spirit crept into my tent, and stood beside me. I felt its icy presence—I saw the dread, accusing eyes. I—oh, Heaven, save——"

The voice died away. His head sank back. The unseeing eyes glared piteously upward, through the waving moss and softly rustling leaves.

A moment later, as Annie rose, Laurence felt a hand touch his. The old man was regarding him with humble, supplicating eyes.

"Forgive me," he said, in a stifled voice. "You have been deeply wronged; but you are generous. May Heaven reward you, Laurence."

A smile like a wave of light broke over the sweet, grave beauty of his lips.

"Heaven has blessed me," he said, "in giving me back my own."

He turned as he spoke to Annie. Her face, now bathed in tears, quivered with wordless tenderness. She drew nearer to him, and folding her hands upon his breast, laid her cheek upon them.

"Laurie," she whispered, "forgive me, and take me back to your heart."

And she felt his silent answer on her lips.

W. F. Jackson.

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The Problem Solved.

Telling of a Love that was Tardy to be Discovered.

"Do you know, Harrington, I can never tell why you don't marry?"

I laughed, but made no reply. I could not tell why myself. I had frequently had this remark made to me, and it had always set me thinking, but I never arrived at a satisfactory solution of the problem.

Everything undoubtedly pointed to me as a marrying man, yet here I was, at nearly forty years of age, still a bachelor, and, so far as I could judge, likely to remain one. It was not want of money that influenced me. I had a comfortable income, being the manager of an opulent City house, where my duties, if somewhat onerous, seldom detained me more than seven hours away from home.

I was a very quiet individual, and when I returned from the City about six o'clock daily, my chief pleasure, after tea, was to make myself as comfortable as possible in an easy-chair, with a pipe and a book.

Perhaps, in the evening, I got Maud to sing and play a little, for I was fond of music, but that was my only diversion.

I have said that I searched vainly for the causes of my continued celibacy, but nevertheless there was one thing which weighed with me to some extent. That was Maud. I wanted to see her married; then, I thought, I should soon follow her example.

Whom I should marry I had never troubled about. Some widow probably—a woman about my own age, who would attend to my comfort, and be a companion for me. I never thought of marrying for love. I was too old.

Maud was twenty-two and not engaged yet, but I had hopes that she soon would be.

This very Henry Brown, who had questioned me on the subject of matrimony, was, I felt sure, in love with my ward. I still call her my ward because, although she is of age, I still consider myself her guardian. As such I had asked many eligible young men to gather around me at my Hampstead villa, hoping that in this way I might find a husband for my girl. But somehow she had never taken to any of them, and I was doubtful even about Brown, for although he was obviously attracted by her, I had never detected anything but friendliness in her treatment of him.

She had been quite a daughter to me. Her father, a dear cousin and schoolfellow of mine, was an officer. He had married when little more than a boy, but, dying suddenly five years later, had left his wife and her one child almost penniless on the world. I had helped them as well as I could, for I was not then as well off as now, but Mrs. Thorpe only survived her husband a year or so.

Then Maud was an orphan, and I had adopted her. I had sent her to a boarding-school, where her education had been well seen to, and when she was seventeen, and her schooling over, I had quitted the rooms I had hitherto occupied in Islington, and bought the villa I still inhabit. Then I had engaged a kind of superior housekeeper in a clergyman's widow, and started housekeeping at thirty-eight.

Brown and I were alone in the dining-room. He was a nice young fellow, a clerk in our office, and I had asked him to my house pretty frequently lately. He had always seemed delighted to accept my invitations, hence my belief that he was in love with Maud. I encouraged him, for I have stated that my great wish was to see the dear child married.

After his remark as to my marrying, we puffed away at our cigars in silence for a few minutes, I watching the clouds of smoke as they ascended, and thinking deeply. Smoking always makes me contemplative. But Brown interrupted my chain of thought.

"Well, I wish I was married," he said.

"A very laudable desire," I replied; "and you can easily attain your object, I should think. Your salary is quite enough to start upon in a quiet way."

"Oh, I know that," he said; "but"—puff-puff—"the fact is, I'm uncertain as to whether she'll have me."

"Whether she'll have you? Are you in love, then?"

"Yes," he said; "there's no use disguising it any longer, Harrington. I love your Maud. May I ask her to become my wife?"

"Oh, by all means, and all success attend you," I replied gaily.

"Thank you," he said. "I will—this very evening too. I'm tired of this suspense."

Before we could say any more, Maud herself entered the room. She invited us to stop smoking and go into the drawing-room, where we were to have some music.

As I looked at her pretty figure and her masses of auburn hair, which fell gracefully over her forehead, I couldn't wonder at anyone being enraptured with her.

Then we put down our cigars, and followed her into the adjoining room. Mrs. Graham, my housekeeper, was out this evening, so when I had listened to one song, I left the two young people to themselves, and I went back into the dining-room.

"While he is proposing I will have a cigar," I thought; "perhaps I will be able to finish it before I have to congratulate them."

Would she accept him? I did not know. Why not? It would be the best thing she could do. But somehow at this critical moment I began to think how it would affect me. Things did not altogether appear in the rosy hue I had imagined they would if Maud were settled in life.

How lonely I should be! Yes; but I should soon be marrying too. But that, after all, was problematical; I might not get anyone to marry me.

The widow I had pictured as a suitable mate might not

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be forthcoming. Maud's leaving would cause a blank in my life; there was no use in trying to disguise the fact. I should have no one to care for then—no one to plan for. Yet how purely selfish it was of me to think thus; let me rather look at the matter as it would affect Maud. She had everything to gain by marriage. If she accepted Brown, I was confident that she would find him a good husband. He might not be rich; but he was a clever young fellow and sure to rise.

How it was I don't quite know, but a remarkable idea came into my head. Why had I never asked Maud to marry me? I tried to dismiss the thought as preposterous. Why, I was like a father to the girl, and she, doubtless, looked upon me in that light. Forty-three and twenty-two—it was absurd! I wished that Brown and I could have changed places; then I smiled at such a wish. I placed my hand involuntarily to my head; there was no denying it, I was getting bald. "No, James Harrington," I said bitterly; "the widow is the match for you. Oh, confound the widows!" I muttered.

The door opened. Brown, no doubt, coming to tell of his acceptance. I must try to congratulate him; but he did not come with the blithe step of a successful lover.

"She has refused me!" he said briefly.

It should not have been so, but a load seemed lifted from my mind. I said:

"I'm sorry for you."

He did not reply. After a few moments he said:

"I think, if you'll excuse me, I'll not stay any longer. A walk will do me good. Besides, I cannot bear to meet her at supper; I would look such a fool."

"He would look such a fool." Wounded vanity, I thought, rather than wounded love. I hoped so.

Somehow, I said good-bye to him with a light heart, and, closing the house-door behind him, I went into the drawing-room.

Maud was sitting at the pianoforte, playing softly. How pretty she looked! I wondered that I had never noticed her beauty so much before to-night. I went towards her.

"Maud," I said, "you have refused that poor young man."

"Yes," she said simply.

'Then you do not love him?"

"Of course not."

"Maud, I should like to see you married."

The soft music was continued for a short while, then she stopped suddenly, and said:

"I shall never marry!"

"Nonsense! Why not?'

"I don't believe I shall ever love anybody excepting, of course, my dear guardian, whom I don't want ever to leave."

"Then you do love your guardian, Maud?"

"As well as I should my dear father, had he lived."

Foolish heart! I did not like the comparison.

"Maud!" I said impulsively, "do you think you could ever alter your resolve as to not marrying, if I asked you?"

She looked up, but did not appear to understand me.

"Am I too old for you to marry me, Maud?"

She rose from the piano, and put her arms round my neck.

"No," she said; "I don't care how old you are, for I love you. Because I loved you I resolved never to marry; because you love me I will break my resolve."

We were married a month later.

When Brown and his wife come to see us occasionally he and I often laugh over that night. He was young and soon recovered from his disappointment, and his Lucy makes him very happy, he says.

It was on one of these visits, when the ladies were in the drawing-room, and he and I were in the garden smoking, that he said to me:

"I know now, Harrington, why you did not marry sooner."

"Why?"

"Because you were in love and didn't know it."

I did not reply, but I acknowledged to myself that he had discovered the true solution of my matrimonial problem.

Frank Gardivan.

Our New Competition.

You will learn all about our new competition in next week's issue. I feel satisfied that the great majority of readers will enter it, and that all who do so will derive great enjoyment therefrom. Everyone will have an excellent opportunity of winning one of our cash prizes. Do not forget that full particulars will be published in the next number of *Short Stories*. Another announcement, which tells more about the competition, appears on page 301.

Result of the Juggled Letters Competition.

Those competitors who at the close of the competition tied for the prizes were given other lists to solve, and eventually the following five competitors, who succeeded in solving the most lists, agreed to divide the three cash prizes; so a cheque for £8 has been sent to each:

Andrew Dawson, 5 Bayham Street, Camden Town, N.W.; Miss P. Nicholls, 54 Prince Street, Deptford, S.E.; F. W. Southey, 46 Woodbine Road, Gosforth, Newcastle-on-Tyne; A. Wood, Outlane, Huddersfield; Miss E. Wood, Outlane, Huddersfield.

The Billiard Tables have been awarded to:

G. W. Parker, 36 Fourth Avenue, Manor Park, E.; W. A. Rutherford, 16 Roman Road, Ilford, Essex.

As the Gramophones could not be divided, and more competitors were in the running for them than there were Gramophones offered, we have sent to each of these competitors a cheque for £1.

Winner of the Eighth Love Problem.

I have very much pleasure in announcing that James Henry Sheppick, "The Elders," Elder Road, Bramley, Leeds, is the winner of the guinea I offered in connection with the Eighth Unsolved Love Problem. Another one of this interesting series will appear shortly.

A Hansom Cab and a Horse for a Prize.

I should like to draw the attention of my readers to the fact that the Editor of *The Big Budget* is offering a hansom cab and a horse as a prize in a competition that is just starting in his paper.

Should the winner prove to be a person to whom a hansom cab would not be acceptable, a cash prize would be given instead.

A New Serial Coming.

In a few weeks' time there will be starting in this paper a grand new serial by a most popular author. The story will be one of enthralling interest. I will tell you more about this next week.

Your Editor.

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THE TWO PAPERS.

How Love Lived Through Adversity.

"Gerald Mannerley is coming back."

"What? Never!" ejaculated Tom Frankfort as he helped himself liberally to bacon and eggs.

"Yes, he is," went on the speaker, "Charlie Forsyth told me so himself last night."

"Well, he has got pluck!" returned Tom, "I should have given Odsey a wide berth if I had left it under such a cloud as he did."

"Rubbish!" said Ted. "If the chap didn't take the money, why not stick to his guns and live it down."

"Easier said than done, Ted. I fancy he'll meet with a lot of 'cold shoulders,' for, after all, one doesn't want to go hob-nobbing round with a suspected thief."

"Gently, gently, Tom," said Dr. Frankfort, a mild, benevolent-looking old gentleman, glancing reprovingly over his paper at the two frank, boyish faces. "Don't be too hard on him; after all, nobody knows much about the affair."

"No, and I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself talking about Gerald in that way, Tom; why, he couldn't possibly do a thing like that. Gerald Mannerley a common thief—oh, it won't stand talking about!"

"Nobody was talking to you, Miss Spitfire," said Tom, glancing across at his sister as he spoke. "Why, what a face you've got, you look like a boiled beetroot, and besides, what business is it of yours, I'd like to know?".

"None whatever," flashed back the girl, "but I'd be man enough not to trample on anybody who was down, if I were you!" As she spoke she rose hastily from the breakfast-table, and left the room, for the tears were perilously near Cicely's eyes, and she knew the consequences of a breakdown in the presence of her brothers. The three were absolutely devoted to each other, but in the manner common to some brothers and sisters, had a way of sparring between themselves. Let anyone else say a word against Cicely, however, and the boys would soon "have it out" with them, at whatever cost.

"Tom, you shouldn't speak in that way to Cicely," said the old man gently. "I am afraid you are very rough with her." This with a sigh to the memory of the gentle wife, whose influence he felt was sadly missed by his children.

"I didn't mean to hurt her feelings," said Tom, shuffling uneasily on his chair. "I'm sorry, dad."

When breakfast was over, Tom made his way to the large, old-fashioned garden, where he was pretty sure of coming across his sister. There she was, right enough, and Tom began his blundering attempt at an apology.

"I say, Cicely, I didn't mean to be unkind about Gerald, but you know——"

"Never mind," interrupted the girl, ready as ever to accept the olive branch. "But I say, Tom"—looking at him with intreating eyes—"be kind to Gerald if he does come home, won't you?"

"I'll let him make a door-mat of me if he likes," said the boy impulsively, "but, Cicely, don't you really think he did take that money?"

"I'm quite sure that he didn't," said the girl earnestly, "and, Tom, think what it must mean to him to be looked down upon and shunned by everybody when he is innocent, and I am sure that he is—Oh, I know it, I know it!" said the girl passionately, the tears gathering in her lovely eyes as she spoke.

"Never mind, old girl," said Tom, putting his arms round her, and kissing her in awkward, boyish fashion. "Cheer up, and as for Gerald—well, if anybody says half a word against him, I'll—I'll—knock him down, that's all," and he looked as if he meant it too.

Thus it was that Gerald Mannerley had two very warm-hearted champions down away in the old-fashioned village where his home was situated. It was quite true that he had left it under a cloud, almost seven years ago. Cicely, then a warm-hearted little tom-boy of fifteen, had been startled by the sound of gravel thrown up at the old school-room window, as she sat there curled up in a huge arm-chair, trying to spoil her pretty eyes by reading in the uncertain light of the fire. How well she remembered rushing to the window with the full expectation of seeing Gerald, for it was a common means of communication between the three merry little souls at "The Gables," and the tall, lonely, rather sad-faced youth, who was just nearing man's estate. Though several years older than any of his three friends, Gerald was very fond of looking them up, and the four together had many a long expedition round the country-side during the holidays, or whenever they could escape the vigilance of their different tutors and governess.

"Is that you, Cicely?" Gerald called up as he saw the brown head with its long, tangled curls appear at the window.

"Yes, Gerald, shall I come down?"

"I wish you would, I want to speak to you," said he, in an odd, muffled sort of voice. With careless indifference to wraps of any sort, Cicely sped down the stairs and out into the garden by the side door to where Gerald was standing in the fast gathering twilight.

"Cicely, I'm going away," he said abruptly.

"Going away, Gerald! Wherever to, and when?" asked the girl, startled by his white face and the look in his deep-set grey eyes.

"Oh, anywhere—I don't care," said he recklessly, "I've come to say good-bye, Cicely, and I want to ask you if you hear anything about—if anybody tells you that I——Oh, I can't say it, Cicely!" desperately, and then with a rush, as if the words choked him. "Will you believe that I never touched the money if they tell you about it?"

"What money, and who says you touched it?" said the girl in bewilderment.

"Some money my uncle has lost, and he thinks that I—that I——"

"The old beast—as if you could," burst in his warm-hearted little friend, incoherently.

"Thank you, Cicely, I thought you, at any rate, would believe me," his proud, sensitive face clearing a little at the girl's ready sympathy. Then, "Would you mind kissing me, Cicely, just this once—I may never see you again, you know?"

"Of course I will!" she cried, flinging her arms round his neck and kissing him—not once, but many times in hearty childish abandon.

As she did so Gerald's face flushed, but he was white to the lips as he unwound the clinging arms, and murmured—half under his breath: "Good-bye, Cicely, my little darling—Good-bye, I must not—dare not—ask you to remember me."

"Oh, but I shall!" said the girl, bursting into tears at the sight of his face. "And, Gerald, whatever they say I shall know that you are good—that you never touched the hateful money." But here she stopped, for Gerald, unable to bear any more, after holding her two hands in a grasp which made them sting, pushed her almost roughly aside, and fearing that she should think him unmanly if he betrayed the emotion he

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could no longer hide, rushed down the garden path and out at the gate.

He left the village the next day, and after the usual nine days' wonder as to his disappearance, and speculations as to its cause, his name was rarely mentioned by those amongst whom most of his early life had been spent. Left an orphan when he was six years old, he owed everything to his uncle—Roger Coventry—who was more than fond of this boy, who looked at him with eyes so like Ella Graham, that even after all these years they would bring back to the old man the memory of that "might have been," for, although he had married, and in a way been happy, the real love of his manhood had been given to Gerald's mother. It was something of a blow, then, when, after a week's absence from "Gate House," he returned to find the £100 he had left, as he thought, securely put away in his large old-fashioned bureau, gone, with not a trace to tell whose hands had removed it, or what had become of it. Thinking it over, he remembered Gerald's presence in the library as he had locked the money into the little secret drawer, depositing the key—carelessly as he admitted to himself, when he found out what had happened—in the corner of the left-hand top drawer underneath the loose papers there.

"Is that you, Cicely?' cried Gerald as he saw the brown head with its long tangled curls appear at the window.

It was not his habit to keep loose money in the house in this way, but his daughter Constance was leaving England the following week with some old friends—the Westertons—who were going out to India, and had invited her to accompany them, and he thought it might prove useful for some of her numerous preparations. Always eager for pleasure and society, Constance had worried her father into allowing her to accept this invitation much against his will. She was never happy in her luxurious though quiet home, and spent her time chiefly in a ceaseless round of gay visiting and pleasure.

On her return from London, Mr. Coventry had tried to persuade her to give up the idea of the Indian trip, and settle down quietly at home for a while. However, he found her heart so set upon going, that in the end he gave way in his usual easy fashion, although, as I have said, most unwillingly. Constance being so often away from home, uncle and nephew were thrown very much together, and were firm friends in spite of the great difference in age, and the really kind-hearted old man's somewhat irascible temper. It was with no real feeling that anything would be seriously wrong, that Mr. Coventry sent for Gerald, to question him as to the money.

"Gerald, my boy, you remember my putting that money in my little secret drawer about ten days before I took Constance down to meet Mr. and Mrs. Westerton?"

"Yes, uncle, I do," answered Gerald in an embarrassed way, flushing scarlet as he did so.

"Well, I can't find a trace of it anywhere, and——"

"Don't ask *me* anything about it, Uncle Roger, please, I'm awfully sorry I can't explain," broke in Gerald, looking the picture of miserable confusion and conscious guilt.

"You can't explain, sir? Why, what is this—explain what?" Gerald made no answer, simply standing with compressed lips as his face changed from red to white, and back again to red, while his eyes had a dangerous gleam in them which showed how great was his effort at self-control.

"You know something of this money, sir," with a keen glance at Gerald's confused face, "and you will either explain to me or leave this house," thundered the old gentleman in a fit of passion, which was made infinitely worse by the thought that it was Ella's son, whom he had cherished and cared for ever since her death, who was thus defying him so outrageously, nay, who had degenerated into a common thief. "Why couldn't the boy have asked him for the money openly? There must be more behind all this!" The thought stung the old man almost to madness, and with his eyes blazing with wrath, he pointed to the door, saying:

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"Once more, you either explain or go; I will harbour neither traitor nor thief."

"Uncle," gasped Gerald, almost stunned by the cruel insult. "Is *that* what you think of me?"

The old man made no answer, simply stood there, pointing mercilessly towards the door, and the next day Gerald shook the dust of Odsey from his feet.

* * * * *

Barely turned twenty when all this occurred, he had a desperate struggle for the first few years of his new life. He would look back in after years and wonder how he had weathered the storm, but his was one of the characters which ripen best under adversity, and he put forth all his strength of mind and body to get the better of cruel circumstances. He drifted from one thing to another at first, until—always fluent with his pen—he was fortunate enough to attract attention by one of his journalistic articles. More work was offered him, and then, as his capabilities became recognised, a small, but permanent position was given him by the well-known firm who had helped him in the first place. Things were easy after that, but it was not until he was twenty-seven that the mantle of "fame" descended upon him. Already well-known as a clever journalist, he published his first book, and its success was instantaneous. "The Enigma of Fate" was commented upon and read far and wide, for the man had succeeded in putting something of his own strong, virile nature into it. The book found its way to brown-haired Cicely and her brothers, and also to the lonely old man at "Gate House." As he pored over the pages which could only have been penned by a noble, true nature, Roger Coventry's heart yearned for the sight of Gerald's face once more, and the longing to clasp his hand and ask forgiveness for his harshness, became so great that he procured Gerald's address and wrote the letter, which eventually brought him back again to the old home.

"Dear Gerald,—*Will you forgive an old man's hasty temper, and come and see me? I have never solved the mystery of the* £100, *but of this I feel sure—a man who writes as you do has no such sordid blot on his mind. I ought to have known you better, my boy, but—ah, well—'let bygones be bygones.' I suppose you have heard that the boat in which Constance sailed for India went down with all hands on board, so I can sign myself in all truth, your lonely, as well as repentant,*

"Uncle Roger."

Gerald's reply to this was a telegram:

"*Shall be with you next week.*"

There was a lump in the old man's throat when they met which grew larger and more uncontrollable than ever, when Gerald, his deep eyes fixed on his uncle's face, said:

"I know what became of that money, Uncle Roger. Can you trust me?"

"With all my heart, my boy," said the old man. "Let us say no more about it."

After this a very happy month ensued, and Gerald was not long in finding out that his warm-hearted little friend had kept her promise of "remembering him." Through all these years the memory of those childish words had been with him, and always, the clasp of soft arms would seem to be about his neck, in moments of solitude and remembrance. To Cicely also he had said:

"Can you trust me?" But her answer had been even more satisfactory than Uncle Roger's.

"With my life, for now and always, Gerald."

Gerald was satisfied, for he had always known that Cicely never doubted him, but as he gazed into those dear eyes, a feeling of deep thankfulness rose within him, that he was sure always of one woman's absolute trust and faith. They were in the garden, where Gerald had said "Good-bye" that night, when with such a sore heart he had sought Cicely's sympathy.

"Let us go and tell Uncle Roger, Cicely."

Cicely's reply was a brilliant blush, then she said laughingly: "How anxious you are to let people know, Gerald."

"Well," answered Gerald, "the dear old fellow will be so delighted to know that you are to reign at 'Gate House.' He told me this morning that I must never leave it again—that he was tired of being 'Master.'"

So they went happily together, and nothing could have exceeded the old man's gratification as he kissed Cicely's sweet face, and said that he must welcome her very soon to "Gate House."

"I am getting a very old man now, my dear," he said, patting her soft cheek, "and I want to see my boy perfectly happy."

With that he went for his usual nap, leaving the lovers together in the cosy, old-fashioned library. It must have been fully an hour after this, that Cicely declared: "They had talked enough nonsense for one afternoon," but, oh, what sweet nonsense it was. She loved to hear it, but, woman-like, would protest, and draw herself away, knowing that she would be quickly taken back to the shelter of those strong, loving arms.

"Isn't that the bureau where the money was, Gerald?" she half-whispered, as she nestled there.

"Yes, darling, Uncle Roger says he has never put anything of any importance in it since; he dislikes the thing so. Force of association, I suppose."

"Oh, then, I may look at it!" said the girl, rising. She pulled out the various drawers, shutting and opening them as if they fascinated her. Gerald rose, and, pushing the slide back, showed her the secret drawer where the ill-fated money had been put. It was quite empty, but Cicely pushed it backward and forward with a thoughtful look in her eyes, as if she would fain have read its secret. Suddenly the drawer jerked.

"Why, it won't open, Gerald," and then, "There is a paper behind, can't you hear the sound?" With another little jerk, the drawer was dislodged, and with it a folded paper, which had evidently been caught in the framework somehow. On the outside was written in characters which were beginning to fade: "Dear father, forgive me, but I have taken the money which you told me was here, to pay some bills I owe in London before going to India. I——"

Cicely read this much, and then stopped with a frightened look on her face.

"Gerald, what does it mean?"

"It means, my darling, that this explains the mystery of the £100. I saw Constance take the money, but I didn't know she had left this note for Uncle Roger. I felt that I couldn't say anything about it to him, much as I blamed the girl—but—his own daughter, you know, Cicely."

"We will tear up this note, Cicely," he said a moment later. "*You* know now, and it won't make things any better to trouble Uncle Roger about it. Whatever were Constance's faults, death has wiped them all away, and——"

"Give me that note, Gerald," came a stern voice from the open balcony window—the very one from which Gerald had seen his cousin take the money—and the old man, with white, set face, came forward into the room. Cicely handed him the note which he read through without a word, and then tore it slowly up, giving voice unconsciously to the very thought which had rankled in his mind when he had blamed the man before him for this same deed.

"Why could she not have asked me for it openly?" He stood for a few moments, his hand over his eyes, and then murmured: "Poor Constance—poor girl! As you said so generously just now, Gerald, 'Death has wiped it all away.' My boy—once more—you forgive me?"

I have only one other thing to say—Cicely's wedding-present from Uncle Roger was the old bureau, and in its secret drawer, on their return from their honeymoon, they found a paper, the title deeds of the "Gate House" estate, with its yearly income of £10,000.

"So you will have no need to work, only just whenever you like," said the happy little bride, after they had read the mysterious looking epistle. "This is a nicer paper than the other, Gerald."

"Yes," he answered fondly, "and one I am glad to find if only for your sweet sake, my darling."

Biddy Lamb.

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Plot and Counterplot.

The Story of a Very Close Shave.

ARTHUR FERRIS was tall, fair, handsome, and twenty-eight. He was also a possessor of a long head, inherited from the maternal side of the house. He was likewise a dutiful son.

It was the two latter circumstances that had, on more than one occasion, saved him from making a triumphant ass of himself. Just fancy! If it had not been for his long head, it is more than likely that he would have fallen desperately in love with that bewitching governess of the Hastings, with whom he had spent several weeks in the country one summer five years ago. But he had given himself time to think, and had fled between two days, much to his later satisfaction.

Then there was that dear little Miss Dixon, whom he had met at the seaside. It had been a glorious evening—that last. They were sitting on the verandah, where they might see and yet be unseen. The soft, dreamy strains of a Strauss waltz floated out from the ballroom. There was the pale, silver light of the moon, the murmuring of the waves on the beach—and all that sort of thing, which you have read about so many times that you have learnt to skip it in the novels.

Well, Elsie was going away—too, too soon. They had talked in sighs and murmurs for half an hour; Arthur's left hand clasped Elsie's dimpled right one, his right arm was about her waist; both hearts beat vigorously, as hearts will on such occasions, and Arthur had just opened his mouth to tell Elsie what she had been expecting for two weeks, when there was a step close at hand, a rustle of skirts, and the cooing voice of the maternal Ferris said:

"I beg your pardon, but will you please excuse Arthur a few moments? There are those miserable business affairs that must be attended to in time for the post."

And thus he was saved a second time, for Elsie had not a penny, and neither had he—at least, not many of them. There were several other occasions when his own long head, or his mamma's, had helped him out—for Arthur was somewhat susceptible. But it is not of these I have to tell.

His time had come. The in-every-way-desirable young person had presented herself. True, she was not so young as she had been; but, then, that was a mere trifle. She was just his own age, of as good a family as his own, and an heiress of considerable degree. She was not—well, not exactly handsome, and was rather inclined to what is politely called plumpness, but Arthur's mamma and Arthur's long head gave their approval—and Arthur did not care who she might be so long as she possessed the above qualifications, particularly the one involving a very neat fortune in her own right.

Besides, Arthur was getting a bit desperate. In fact, he had so far exceeded his own salary and the maternal allowance (which, by the way, was as large as Mrs. Ferris could afford), that nothing short of a miracle, or a matrimonial alliance such as he had been so long seeking, could save him from getting into very deep water.

And thus it came to pass that this winter found him engaged to Miss Bernice Field, much to the satisfaction of his mother, who was visiting in London, and to whom he had, like the dutiful son he was, sent the gratifying news at once.

He was disappointed, however, on one point. He had pleaded artfully for an early marriage, but Miss Field had set her foot down with much firmness, and said he must go through a long probationary period—all of which Arthur failed to understand. He had always been noted for his persuasive powers, and had flattered himself that Bernice, with her gentle, clinging, bud-like ways, would succumb at once.

Now, be it known, that Miss Bernice Field had not arrived at years of discretion for nothing. Neither had she—a not unprepossessing young person, with nearly twenty thousand in her own right—passed through the experience of ten seasons without gathering unto herself much knowledge of the ways and wiles of wicked man. She had had, as might have been expected, offers to a high number, but thus far the gentlemen concerned had failed—by reason of their unanimous desire to touch her purse—to touch, in the first place, the all-important key to it, which was hidden away in her plump bosom. And Miss Bernice Field was worldly-wise in her day and generation.

She was certainly in love with Ferris—there could be no doubt of that. It is quite as certain that she was very seriously in love with him, but, with the wisdom born of experience, she did not let him know one-half of what she felt for him.

If anyone had told Ferris that he was just now in a very shaky position, he would have scoffed. His chum, Ed. Cross, who was spending the winter at the house during Mrs. Ferris' absence, had once suggested that "there's many a slip," but Arthur merely shied a shoe at him and whistled serenely.

It was in this frame of mind that, one evening in February, he ran lightly up the steps of the Field mansion to call on her whom Cross unfeelingly referred to as his "little lady-love." It was warm, and the front door stood ajar. The footman was not in his accustomed place, so Ferris, with the air of one who knew just where he was going, stepped inside. From the open door of Papa Field's study came the sound of voices in earnest discussion, and one of them spoke his own name.

He halted, irresolute, as would anyone else under like circumstances. Papa Field was speaking.

"Of course, my dear, you are your own mistress, and I can only advise you. It seems to me, however, that you have done a very foolish thing to engage yourself to this young Ferris. True, he seems an exemplary young fellow, and he

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comes of an excellent family; but it is well-known that he has only a small allowance from the estate, in addition to a beggarly two-hundred-a-year salary. How do you know it is you, and not your money, that he wants? It is a brutal question, I know; but it is one you have probably asked of yourself half a dozen times concerning other young men."

Arthur, out in the hall, standing in much the same attitude a child assumes when speaking its first "piece" in school, winced, but waited for the answer. It came in serious, thoughtful tones, which indicated plainly that Miss Bernice also had considered this very matter.

"N—no, I am sure you misjudge him, papa. Of course I understand how he is situated financially, and all that. But I am sure he is honest and honourable, and that he—cares for me very much. There are a thousand ways by which I can learn much that you cannot, and——"

"Yes—yes, I understand. But suppose you should put him to the test, do you think he would come through—ah—er—unscathed, as it were? Suppose you should tell him that I had lost all your money and mine in unfortunate speculation—that we were beggars, and had not a penny we could call our own? Are you afraid to try him?"

There was a brief silence. Then:

"I don't like to tell a falsehood, papa; but it would be only a 'white lie,' and perhaps for the best. Yes, I'll try him to-morrow night."

"That's my dutiful girl. Now run along and let me work."

There was the sound of a kiss, and the perspiring young man in the hall hastened to get out of the house. He wanted time to think, but the first thing that entered his head as he reached the pavement was a fanciful picture of the dainty Miss Field, with her one hundred and sixty pounds avoirdupois, "running along," and he smiled broadly. Then he walked rapidly over to the next street to catch a cab to his club, there to hold a confab with Cross.

On the steps he hesitated a moment. "Had I better go back now?" he thought. "No; she won't have her little tale of woe ready, and might be put out if I call to-night. I might give myself away, too. Better have time to get my speech prepared." And this astute young man went in and proceeded to make himself comfortable.

The next evening, with his usual light heart and good spirits, he rang the door-bell of the Field mansion. "Yes, Miss Field was in," Peter said. Ferris went into the drawing-room and sat down, running rapidly over in his mind the various tender speeches he had prepared for the emergency. Bernice was a long time coming, he thought, for one who expected him.

Presently she entered—slowly—heavily. Her head bent low over her ample bosom, and her breath came short and fast. Ferris went forward to meet her, his arms outstretched. He was something of an actor himself, and he knew it.

"Bernice! Darling! What is the trouble with my little girl?" (Another good stroke. Miss Field liked to be called "little.")

"Oh, Arthur! I don't know how to tell you. It is too dreadful! Papa——"

"What? Has your father been——"

"Oh, no, not that, but—worse! Arthur, we are—beggars."

And Miss Field, delivering these last words with wonderful impressiveness, hung her head, and sobbed bitterly behind her lace handkerchief.

Then it was that Ferris, like the young man of action that he was, put his arm as far round his tearful *fiancée* as possible and with some difficulty, led her to a seat and pulled her down on his glossy shirt-front.

He was very, very sorry, as she must know. But it was nothing. Her father would recoup himself—he had many influential friends. As for her, had she not him—her Arthur? He would not, he once interrupted her to say, permit her, through a sense of false pride, to cast him off now, when she most needed him. No, never.

He had three hundred a year. It was not much, he knew, but they could live on it. And did she suppose, for one instant, that he had expected to live on his wife's money? No! A thousand times no!

"We will have a quiet little wedding, dearest, and after it is over we will go quietly to our own little cottage in the suburbs, which you and I will get ready in the meantime, and there we will be the happiest couple in the world. What! Bernice, am I to understand that you laugh at my cherished plans?"

For Bernice had leapt to her feet and was laughing heartily.

"Why, you foolish boy, I was only teasing you a bit. Don't you think I'd make a good actress? Papa and I haven't lost a——"

Here was Mr. Ferris' opportunity. She had doubted him; oh, cruel blow! If she could not trust him now, how could she have any faith in him when they were married? Perhaps, after all, it were best—

And he strode haughtily to the door.

But this was not part of Miss Field's programme, and she did what any very-much-in-love woman would do under the like circumstances, so that in a very few seconds two people were sitting on a divan, in a very lover-like attitude indeed.

* * * * *

An hour or so later, a young man, walking briskly down the street, was reflecting on the vagaries of Chance and his own good luck.

If Peter had been at the door—if he had been ten minutes later—if he had sneezed in the hall—if——

"It was an awfully close shave!" he reflected, and he stopped and shook hands with himself, much to the amazement of the policeman at the corner.

Ronald Wood.

Kitty: "Harry Dix says you are as pretty as a picture." Clara: "Nonsense! He didn't mean it." Kitty: "Oh yes, he did. But, of course, you know Harry's taste in pictures isn't anything to brag about."

"Did you tell Clarence you would cut him off without a penny, if he married that girl?" "No," answered the wise father; "the fellow would marry her in spite of that. I told the girl."

Dolly: "Fred called me an angel last night." Molly: "Yes; he told me he thought that you were rather flighty."

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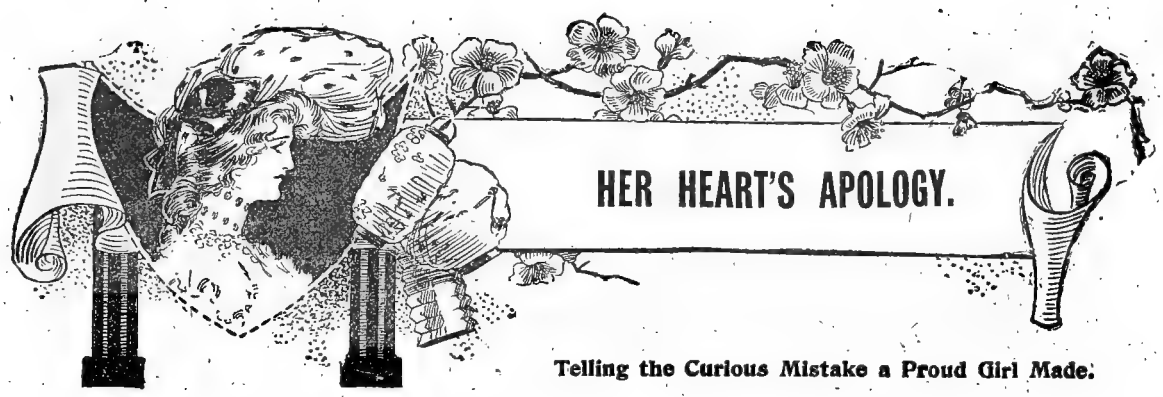

HER HEART'S APOLOGY.

Telling the Curious Mistake a Proud Girl Made.

THERE was a blaze of lights in the Arsdales' house, and the sound of music and voices came floating through the open windows and across the still night air; so that a belated pedestrian, passing down Maple Avenue, said that they were giving another of their big dances, and he wondered how much it would cost old Arsdale a year to entertain on such an enormous scale!

The passer-by was wrong, however, for this was in reality a small and entirely impromptu affair, arranged by Miss Estherina at a moment's notice, in honour of a party of friends who had come up from town to dine with them and who were going back by the midnight train.

The friends had expected to meet Mr. Arsdale in town, but at the last moment he had sent them word that he had been unavoidably detained and would not be able to come down until the 9.30 express; and now, instead of Mr. Arsdale, a boy had come with a telegram, which said: "Shall not be home to-night; staying with Judge Cavendish. Send law-papers down by Dick to-morrow."

Miss Estherina laughed gaily. "Just like poor, dear papa," she said, "not to remember that Dick has gone to Oxford for Charles Davis' wedding!" And turning to the friends from town, she added, with amusing plaintiveness: "You really ought to let yourselves be persuaded to stay here now. How can you think of going down to-night and leaving poor mamma and me, two helpless women, alone in this wilderness of a house?"

This gave rise to many jests and bright suggestions, one of which was that Mrs. and Miss Arsdale should abandon the house and accompany their friends back to town. But Mrs. Arsdale added the climax to the amusement of the party by her complacent announcement that "she should not be afraid to stay in a haunted house with her daughter, for Estherina was as good as any man."

There was at least one man among the little company who thought that Estherina Arsdale was better than any man—or than any other young woman; and he thought, too, that the object of his adoration had never looked more lovely or more unattainable than she did that night. Her black gauze dinner-gown was so wonderfully becoming to her rich colouring and majestic style of beauty; and her dark eyes were as brilliant as the superb pendant of diamonds which lay upon her perfect neck, and rose and fell and flashed its thousand points of light with her every breath and motion.

"But, Miss Arsdale," questioned a youth from the city, "if you should be awakened to-night by a burglar in the house what would you do?"

"Shoot him!" she replied, without an instant's hesitation, and Mrs. Arsdale added:

"Estherina is a good markswoman, and, indeed, I was myself in my earlier days."

Harold Ingraham lingered a moment after the other guests were gone.

"Mrs. Arsdale," he said, "joking aside, will you not permit me to stay here to-night on guard? I assure you I should be most happy——"

He spoke to the mother, but his eyes were fixed upon the daughter's lovely face.

"Mr. Ingraham, you are very kind, but I could not think of such a thing. And you must not take our jests so seriously; my daughter and I have often been alone together, both in the country and in town, and neither of us is at all nervous."

"But, at least, cannot I be of service in closing up the house?"

His eyes sought Estherina's with a mute appeal, but she only smiled and shook her head.

"Hannah always sees to the closing up; you are really very kind, but there is nothing you can do."

There was no possible excuse for lingering now, so, with a gentle pressure of her lovely but unresponsive hand, he went away; and his heart grew heavy as he traversed the few hundred feet that lay between their homes, and thought how self-reliant Estherina's nature was and how hopeless it seemed that she would ever accept his protection or his love.

After Ingraham's departure Mrs. Arsdale went at once to her room, but Estherina remained in the drawing-room for a few minutes while Hannah was locking up the house.

She bent for a moment over a jar filled with the roses that Ingraham had brought to her that night; and as she inhaled their fragrance she thought, with a mild compassion, of his infatuation for her, and wondered a little why it had not been possible for her to return his affection. She certainly liked him—but then she liked a dozen other men as well; and she tried to find some sufficient reason to explain her indifference to them all.

"It must be because I have never found a nature as strong as my own," she thought. "It would be insufferable to be tied to a husband upon whom I must necessarily look down; and it is the fate of all strong natures to be lonely—to stand apart by themselves, as if upon an inaccessible mountain height."

Looking up from her reverie, she saw Hannah struggling with a window which refused to let itself be shut.

"Come, let me try it," she said. "There!" she added triumphantly, for while Hannah held back the lace draperies Estherina had reached forward among the palms which gracefully filled the window-niches, and, with a slight exertion of her superb strength, had closed the unruly window and turned its refractory catch. Then she drew back with a little smile of satisfaction, not unpleased to have shown physical superiority as well as the mental power of which she was so proud.

She slowly ascended the broad stairway while Hannah was extinguishing the lights, and she saw with some surprise that her mother had made all her preparations for the night while she had been dreaming in the room below.

"Come, hurry a little, Estherina," Mrs. Arsdale said. "You

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will sleep in my bedroom with me to-night, and I am tired, and want to get to sleep quickly."

Estherina therefore hurried rather more than was usual with her, and in a few minutes entered her mother's bedroom, as stately and handsome in her dainty, white-ruffled wrapper, over which her luxuriant dark hair fell in heavy braids, as she had been in her black gauze evening gown so short a time before.

She carried a little case of polished wood, which she placed upon the table, saying composedly:

"Dick's revolver; it won't be needed, of course, but it's just as well to have it handy."

Then she locked the doors, and put out the light.

In the middle of the night Estherina was awakened suddenly by a sound like stealthy footsteps on the roof. Like a flash it came over her that her father and brother were away, that the jewels and the plate which they were known to have were a tempting bait, and that the burglars they had been talking about for years had come at last!

Quickly and slowly she rose, and slipped on her dressing-gown, while she awakened her sleeping mother with the words:

"Hush, don't be frightened; there's a man on the roof. If I see him I shall shoot!"

Swiftly reaching the table where it lay, Estherina caught up the revolver, and then turned to the French window, which stood open upon a tiny balcony. The whole place was bathed in moonlight. She saw a shadow pass swiftly across the roof and disappear just where a ladder was upreared outside the window of her dressing-room.

"Thieves! Murderers!" cried Estherina in a ringing voice; and the report of a revolver was heard on the still night air. Again she cried out: "Help! Robbers! Don't let them get away!"

And again and again the sharp report of the revolver rang through the night.

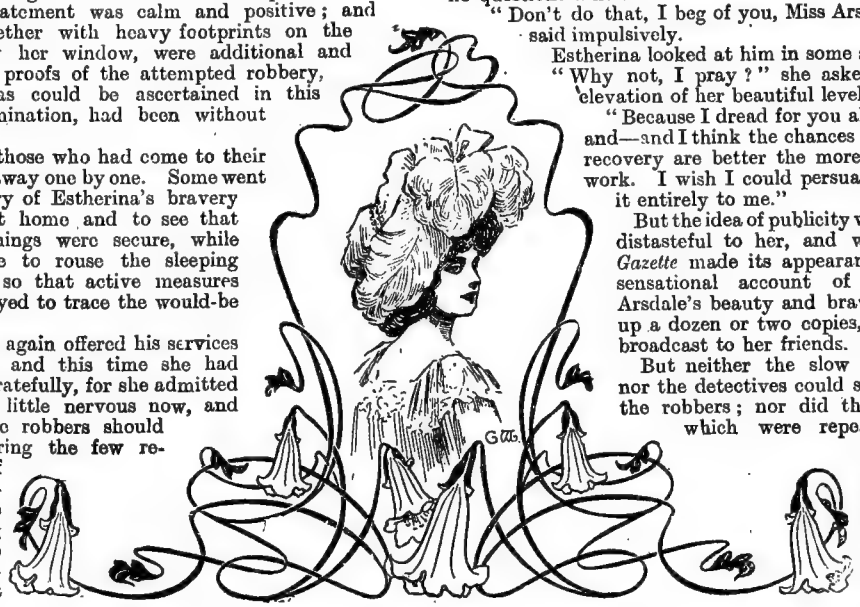
Answering cries were heard in the distance and soon ft approaching footsteps, and while Estherina still stood like a beautiful statue in the pale moonlight, a smoking revolver clasped in her hand, and Mrs. Arsdale crouched in the window beside her, Harold Ingraham came dashing up, the first to arrive, hastily dressed and breathless, and white with alarm.

Other neighbours quickly followed; the frightened servants came flocking down, and a thorough search was made through the house and also through the grounds, lest the thieves might still be lurking in the bushes about the place.

Estherina's statement was calm and positive; and the ladder, together with heavy footprints on the soft turf below her window, were additional and most-convincing proofs of the attempted robbery, which, as far as could be ascertained in this first hasty examination, had been without success.

After a while those who had come to their assistance went away one by one. Some went to carry the story of Estherina's bravery back to those at home and to see that their own fastenings were secure, while others had gone to rouse the sleeping village officials, so that active measures might be employed to trace the would-be robbers.

Ingraham had again offered his services to Mrs. Arsdale, and this time she had accepted them gratefully, for she admitted that she felt a little nervous now, and dreaded lest the robbers should return. So during the few remaining hours of the night he remained in the house, pacing slowly to and fro in the now dimly-lighted and quiet drawing-room, so recently the scene of brilliant repartee and mirth.



Estherina, meanwhile, sat by the window overhead, and watched the moonlight grow pale and fade away in the first dim light of dawn. She was not nervous, but calm—yes, very calm, and well satisfied that she had proved herself so efficient in the late emergency—even though in the uncertain moonlight she had missed her aim.

The pale light on the horizon grew rosy in the glow of the coming sunrise. Estherina saw that her mother was sleeping peacefully now, and she went softly away to her own room to dress and then, early as it was, joined Ingraham, who was now walking up and down the gravel path before the door.

She was annoyed to find that he had removed the ladder, though from the crushed and trampled grass she easily found the place where it had stood. As she was looking at the heavy footprints she discovered something else—a clot of red that stained the ground, and then another, and still another.

She turned to Ingraham; he, too, had seen the crimson spots, and started visibly, but he checked the words that had risen to his lips as Estherina said, in a low voice:

"Then I must have hit one of them, after all. See, you can trace him by these drops of blood here—and here. He went round the house and off in that direction."

She straightened herself, and went on composedly:

"I thought last night they had not taken anything, but I was mistaken. My diamond pendant is gone."

Ingraham started, and a curious pallor overspread his face.

"Your pendant, the one you wore last night—*gone?*" he stammered.

"Yes," she replied. "I carelessly left it lying on the bureau in my dressing-room. I never thought of it again until this morning, and then it was gone. The ladder was just outside that window," she added significantly.

Ingraham seemed so disconcerted at this intelligence that Estherina thought scornfully that he was not much of a man, and she felt something very like a contemptuous pity for him at the moment.

"Now, I wish to recover my pendant at any cost," she went on after a short pause. "I am very fond of it, apart from its value; and I am even more anxious to get it back than to have the robbers brought to justice. If I wait until papa's return to-night it may be too late, so may I ask you to put the matter into a good detective's hands at once, and also to advertise in all the papers, offering a suitable reward and no questions asked?"

"Don't do that, I beg of you, Miss Arsdale," Ingraham said impulsively.

Estherina looked at him in some surprise.

"Why not, I pray?" she asked, with a slight elevation of her beautiful level brows.

"Because I dread for you all such publicity; and—and I think the chances for the pendant's recovery are better the more quietly we can work. I wish I could persuade you to leave it entirely to me."

But the idea of publicity was not altogether distasteful to her, and when the *Weekly Gazette* made its appearance with a long, sensational account of Miss Estherina Arsdale's beauty and bravery she bought up a dozen or two copies, and sent them broadcast to her friends.

But neither the slow local authorities nor the detectives could succeed in tracing the robbers; nor did the advertisements which were repeated week after week in the papers bring any tidings of Miss Arsdale's precious diamond pendant, and Estherina had now begun to

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despair of ever seeing it again.

But the thieves had made no further attempts to enter the house, which had now been made doubly secure by the latest burglar alarms and by the presence of a fine young mastiff which Dick had brought with him from Oxford, where the news of the burglary had reached him.

The summer festivities had gone on without interruption, and every different set of guests at the Arsdales' had been regaled with the story of Estherina's bravery, until that young woman had begun to tire of all the praise that she received.

One warm afternoon she was reclining in a low deck chair, awaiting the return of a driving party of Dick's friends. Ingraham, on his way up from the train had seen her there alone and joined her.

Conversation had now languished, and Estherina was watching him from under her half-closed eyelids, half amused at his glances of undisguised admiration in her direction.

He was still her devoted attendant—her slave—upon whom she looked down, with a curious sort of pity, from her own solitary height. She sometimes even admitted to herself that she would miss not him exactly but his unfailing attentions after the inevitable question had been asked and answered.

As they were sitting thus a strange, unusual sound caused them both to turn at the same moment, and they saw Lion, the mastiff, who had been ailing and kept tied in the stable for a day or two, approaching rapidly. His head hung down, his eyes were dull and staring, froth dropped from his lips, while from his open mouth came a dull and terrible sound that struck Estherina with a sudden horror. It was evident, on the instant, that the dog was mad.

With a cry of absolute terror, she sprang through the open window, overturning the pots of palms in her flight, but never pausing until she had reached her room and shut herself safely within. Then a horrible fascination impelled her to look from her window at what was taking place below.

But she was unprepared for the sight which met her eyes. Ingraham, upon whom she had looked down so long from her superior height, had not attempted to escape, but had caught the brute by the throat, and was holding him out at arm's length, while his fingers were closing tighter and tighter, like a vice, choking away the struggling animal's breath.

But would Ingraham's strength hold out? She had never dreamt of such strength in those slim, white hands. Would not the brute, in his agony, wrench himself free, and bury his cruel fangs in the flesh of the man she—once—thought she despised?

"Ah!" She caught at the window-frame for support, for Ingraham, suddenly hurling the weakened brute to the ground, had caught up his heavy stick, and dealt a blow so swift and true that Lion neither moved nor moaned.

Still trembling in every limb, Estherina slowly descended the broad stairway. Once or twice she had to stop a moment to recover herself, and when she at last reached the foot Ingraham was gone, and two of the workmen he had sent were carrying the dead mastiff away.

Suppose, in the desperate encounter, the dog's teeth had even grazed his hand! The anxiety and suspense she felt were maddening, and she hastened in to send the first servant she could find to follow Mr. Ingraham and bring her word whether or not he had escaped unhurt.

She went into the drawing-room to await the answer, and there the first thing that met her eyes were the palms she had overturned in her hasty flight. A feeling of shame came over her and mingled with other new and unknown emotions as she thought of her sudden and cowardly retreat and contrasted it with Ingraham's instant courage.

She had lifted one of the palms upright and had turned to raise another when she saw that the jar in which it had stood had been broken in its fall and was lying now in two pieces, like an open shell. At the same time she caught sight of something sparkling, yet half concealed by the broken fragments and the earthen pot of the prostrate palm. She bent down, uttered a low cry, and rose again with her long-lost diamond pendant in her hand.

At that moment Ingraham entered the room.

"They told me you had sent over to inquire. I am unhurt, but I should be, beyond measure, happy if I thought that you really cared," he said, in tones that showed he was in earnest.

"I do care," she answered slowly, while her colour came and went. "I care very much; I think I have been looking at things all summer through the large end of the glass, and—and it has just suddenly been turned round; but—I cannot see things plainly even now."

Her upturned glance was almost appealing; Ingraham had never seen her so lovely, so gentle, before.

"Look," she continued slowly, and the diamond pendant glittered in her outstretched hand. "I have just found this; it was in that broken jardinière. There must have been just space enough for it to lie concealed."

"Ah!" he exclaimed with evident satisfaction, "I was sure it would be found at last!"

"Found!" she repeated. "Then you think it was not stolen?"

He bit his lip, but did not reply, and she went on hurriedly:

"Could it not have been stolen and afterwards placed here by the thief, either out of fear of discovery or for some other reason and knowing that it would be found and restored to its owner some day? I see you do not think so, but then, how else could it have come here?"

She paused, and seemed to be rapidly considering her own question in every light; then she started, and said in a low hurried voice:

"*That* was the window I closed myself that night; it was hard to shut, and I leant far in among the curtains and the plants. Could it have been—oh, do you think that the chain could have become loosened? But, Mr. Ingraham, the ladder—the footsteps I heard on the roof? You are still silent. Do you think I could have been dreaming? Don't you think there was any robber, then, at all? Oh, what a pitiful fool I have made of myself, then; and you have known it all this time!

"But the ladder and the drops of blood—you saw that, too there must have been a man prowling about the place that night! Mr. Ingraham"—in a tragic tone—"I remember that we had painters working here then; could it have been their ladder? And the blood-drops—oh, could they have been—red paint? And you have known this all the while, and—I thought you——"

"But, Estherina, no one knew except me, and no one will ever know. My darling, it was such a natural mistake; and I never intended you to be undeceived."

Her haughty pride was now all gone, and, with a new, sweet, self-abasement, she said:

"You are the most generous and the bravest, manliest man I have ever known!"

John Sharp.

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A Near-sighted Relative.

She: "I understand that old man Millyuns is a distant relative of yours." He: "That's right. He's so distant that he isn't able to recognise me."

They Agreed.

Lodger (quarrelling with landlady): "I haven't lived in lodgings for six years for nothing." Landlady: "No, and you're not going to live here for nothing, either."

Needed Coaching.

Young Farmer (apologetically): "I know I'm a perfect bear in my manners, Miss Edna." Sweet Sixteen (hesitatingly): "No, you're not; you—you—have never hugged me yet!"

Not What She Expected.

Lady (of uncertain age): "I have put your seat next to mine, Mr. Rawlinson. I hope you do not mind?" Mr. Rawlinson: "Mind, my dear lady! You know how little it takes to satisfy me."

A Cruel Suggestion.

Elderly Heiress (sadly): "No, Mr. Jones, my heart is dead to the tender passion. The only man I ever loved, or could ever love, was killed at the battle of—of——" Mr. Jones (disappointed, and reaching for his hat): "Waterloo?"

A Relief to Him.

Old Gentleman: "Do you think, sir, that you are able to support my daughter without continually hovering on the verge of bankruptcy?" Suitor: "Oh, yes, sir, I am sure I can." Old Gentleman: "Well, that's more than I can do. Take her and be happy."

What He Thought.

"Are you aware," asked the sweet girl graduate, as they strolled along the sandy shore, "that the moon affects the tide?" "I know it affects romantic lovers," replied the young man in the scene; "but I was under the impression it lost its power after they were tied."

She Preferred a Comet.

"I wish I were a star," he said, smiling at his own poetic fancy. "I would rather you were a comet," she said dreamily. His heart beat tumultuously. "And why?" he asked tenderly, at the same time taking her unresisting little hand in his own, "and why?" "Oh," she said, with a brooding earnestness that fell freezing upon his soul, "because then you would come round only once in about fifteen years."

Q. E. D.

"Do I love George?" mused Clara softly. "Or is it simply a sister's affection I feel for——" Just then Bobby burst noisily into the room and interrupted her meditations. "Get out of here, you little wretch!" she shouted, and seizing him by the arm she shot him through the door. "Ah, no," she sighed, as she resumed her interrupted train of thought; "my love for George is not a sister's love. It is something sweeter, purer, higher, and holier."

She Didn't Mean to be Unkind.

Missionary (who is really braver than he looks): "Our station was so remote, that for a whole year my wife never saw a white face but my own!" Sympathetic Young Woman: "Oh, poor thing!"

A Worse Fate!

He: "Archibald saved the widow from drowning, you know, but he couldn't save himself." She: "You surely don't mean that he lost his life?" He: "Not exactly. The widow married him."

The Reason Why.

"Mamma seems to have a great fascination for you," remarked the beautiful girl. "She does fascinate me," he admitted, "by keeping me guessing as to whether you'll be like her at her age."

As They Do Things Now.

George: "May I steal a kiss?" Maud: "No, George. You're too old-fashioned for me!" George: "Pray explain." Maud: "If you were up-to-date you'd have kissed me first and asked afterwards!"

Ready to Start.

"If you were going to elope, which would you prefer—a motor car or——" "Oh, Charles, I never thought of doing such a thing; but if you insist, let us not wait—I'm an awfully good walker!"

The Soft Answer.

Wife: "Surely, dear, you don't mean to say that you're going to take a sea voyage and leave me behind?" "Yes, dear; the doctor says that I must absolutely keep away from all sweet things for a time!"

A Sheep as for a Lamb.

Host: "Come, come, Brown. Do go home, old man; it's two o'clock. What will Mrs. Brown say?" Brown: "Rest easy, my boy. Mrs. Brown was just as mad three hours ago as she's going to be all night."

Very Ambiguous.

She: "And are you really so much better since you returned from your trip abroad?" He: "Yes, indeed! I'm quite another man, I assure you." She: "Well, I'm sure all your friends will be delighted to hear it."

Proof Positive.

"There's one thing I will say," remarked Mrs. Showoff, "and that is that my daughter Arabella has a fine disposition." "Indeed." "Yes, the way she sits for hours listening to herself play on the piano shows remarkable self-control."

His Plan of Campaign.

"You seem to have no ambition," asserted the strenuous one. "But I have," said the indolent man; "I intend to be rich." "Then why don't you work—like Brown, for instance?" "Ah," said the indolent man, "I've had my eye on him for some time. Good fellow, Brown! I like to see him piling up wealth. He's working for me." "Working for you?" "Yes; he's killing himself making a fortune, and I am planning to get it by marrying his widow."

Gave the Game Away.

A dear little bride in a railway carriage was like most brides in desiring to avoid identification as a bride. The husband went out to smoke. An old lady opposite talked to her. "You are lately married, my dear, I know," she said kindly. "Oh, no—we have been married a long time," returned the younger woman briskly. "Ah, excuse me. You are so young, and you seem so happy." "Oh, we have been married eight, yes, eight years." "Well, well! And I thought at first you were on your wedding journey." "Oh, no! My husband will tell you—here he comes—that we have been married eight years. Haven't we, George?" "Yes—yes, certainly," he replied. "Do you know, Katie," he added with a wriggle, "I have some of that awful rice down my back yet."

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SPLENDID SERIAL.

Dupes of Destiny

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

By Blanche Eardley, Writer of "The Bond Between."

FORTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

Two Girls.

"You are better now? Come, try to eat this," and a gentle hand raised the dark head on the pillow and put something to the lips of the girl lying there.

Marcella looked up startled, into a white face bending over her. She had been ill for some days, but did not recognise the face of the nurse bending over her. It was not that of one of the Court servants—for poor Jane was still ill—neither was it that of quite a lady, yet there was a certain refined sweetness about the expression of the mouth and in the fairness of the skin that spoke of "better days," and a superior position.

"Who are you?" she said, raising herself on her elbow and fixing her large, dark eyes on the girl. "It is only a few days since I was hurt—I think it must have been in another room, not this—and yet your face is that of a stranger. How did you come here without my knowing?"

The girl looked at her sharply. "I was telegraphed for," she said curtly. "You had fallen and hurt your head, and Sir Cyprian sent for a nurse."

A slow stain of colour dyed Marcella's face. She remembered how—in the room downstairs—her father had told her something awful—something that had robbed her of reason almost, and made her long to die! But she was alive, alive and well, and she could not stay under that roof another day. She raised herself up, and speaking hurriedly said: "Help me to dress, please. I am going away at once!"

The girl pushed her back gently. "You must stay where you are—those are the orders I have, to keep you in bed and not let you get excited. Sir Cyprian said you were to be given your medicine when you woke up."

She went to the table and poured into a glass some drops of a white-looking fluid from a bottle. Marcella put it to her lips and tasted it. Suddenly she drew back with a sharp cry of terror. "N—no, I can't drink it," she moaned. "It is nasty stuff. He is trying to poison me—to frighten me into an idiot like he did my mother!"

"Hush!" said the nurse sharply; "you mustn't talk like that, dear! Who would want to poison you? No one could wish to kill a girl who's got rich relations."

"You don't know," Marcella panted, her eyes blazing with fire. "You don't even know my name! I am Marcella Rust, and they hate me—Sir Cyprian hates me, and wishes me dead, as he wishes Philip Nullius!"

"What is Philip Nullius to you?" the other girl said quickly. "They told me you were a visitor to the Court—but, Marcella!" her voice broke off abruptly. "They say, too, that you've got hallucinations, and I mustn't listen to you."

"Ah, but you will, you will!" Marcella clutched her arm. "You are a woman like myself, and in the name of womanhood you won't stand by and see me killed. I am alone—my lover, Philip Nullius, can't know that they are trying to kill me, and my letters to my aunt, Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, are stopped. I have no friend—none if you turn against me."

The effect of her wild beseeching words was miraculous upon the girl standing by the bed. A startled look flashed into her hollow blue eyes. "Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, your aunt!" she gasped. "Then—then you are the cousin of—of Edward Day!"

Marcella looked at her in surprise. "No, Edward Day is no relation of mine," she said proudly. "He was adopted by my aunt out of charity, because he was a foundling, but she cast him off when he insulted me once by asking me to marry him. I hate him more than I can tell you," she continued, "but what do you know about him? What is he to you?"

The white-faced nurse's reply was a strange one. She fell on her knees by the bed, and, flinging her arms round Marcella's, sobbed: "I will be your friend, dear—your enemies are mine—yes, mine to the bitter end. Those you hate I also hate, and my hatred for Edward Day is even stronger than yours—for he is my husband!"

Marcella sat up and clutched the kneeling girl with both hands. Her face was flushed, and her fever-lit eyes burnt with excitement.

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"Your husband! Your husband!" she repeated. "Edward Day your husband! Surely you cannot mean that he was married to you when he——" She stopped suddenly.

The other girl raised her head from the bed in which she had buried it, and pushed back the loose yellow hair on her brow. Marcella noticed vaguely that she had a nasty cut on her temple, which had but recently healed.

"Yes, I understand," the girl said slowly, "he was my husband when he asked you to marry him. He planned black-hearted villany for you, and in another way for me too; but, thank God, his plans failed each time!" Her blue eyes sparkled with a strange lustre as she murmured again the words, "failed each time!"

"What was your name?" Marcella said quietly. Strangely enough she felt suddenly better now that a fresh interest had been brought into her life, making her forget her own troubles, and for the nonce play the comforter. Her quick, eager brain regained the balance it had momentarily lost under the weight of the burden of sorrow that had so nearly overpowered it. There was someone weaker than herself—more sinned against perhaps, and she would bring her wits and heart into the service of the prostrate girl whom Chance had flung across her path at the eleventh hour.

"My name was Lottie Haste," the girl answered slowly, drying her eyes that had moistened. "But my husband—Edward Day—thinks I am dead," she smiled strangely, "and now I would rather remain so for a time. I have something to accomplish before revealing myself to him as his living wife."

She turned to Marcella suddenly. "I actually thought you were an enemy," she breathed. "I hated your name when that cur lied to me about you so cruelly; I longed to see you dead even, but now," she placed her thin hand on Marcella's, "I will help you in whatever you wish; do all I can to spoil the plans of those that you say hate you. Tell me," she went on, "you mentioned just now that your lover, Philip Nullius, was hated by Sir Cyprian, who wished him dead. Why is that? What harm has he done?"

"I don't know," Marcella murmured. "I only know that for some strange reason my father wishes him out of the way. He knows Philip is my lover, and yet that cannot be his only reason for being so bitter against him. The other day he came back after having been kept away for a very long time, and though he did not tell me everything, I feel that my father was mixed up in his absence in some way, and only a few days ago I managed to prevent him from meeting a man who had met him when he was away.

"This man called him the 'Vicar,' and I heard him talk about someone called the 'Spade,' thinking Philip was one of themselves, for he had a disguise on. There is some conspiracy on foot, I know, and yet I cannot gauge my father's attitude."

Her new friend stole a quick glance at her, full of wonder and pity. She had listened quietly and intently to all that Marcella had said, and her eyes had contracted at the mention of the names "Vicar" and "Spade," but she had kept silent.

"Tell me," she said abruptly, "does Sir Cyprian have any men friends here to see him. Do you know any by sight?"

Marcella puckered her fine brows thoughtfully. "No, only the horrid doctor he brought to see me once. I think his name was Winter." She shuddered at the recollection of the cruel, soft-voiced man, who had insinuated that she was not responsible for her actions. "And then," she went on; "there is a man whose name I do not know, but I have seen him several times here; he is tall and conspicuous by a black beard and very dark hair and eyebrows; sometimes he wears glasses also. He puzzles me very much but I don't fancy he has anything to do with Philip.

"Oh, Lottie!" she exclaimed passionately, "help me—you have suffered through a man I hate—perhaps I have also suffered through a man you hate! Our lives, so long separated though running on parallel lines, have touched at last at one common junction; you won't refuse to be my friend, will you, Lottie? I—I am so afraid of some things, and I may perhaps be your friend also."

Lottie's hand closed over hers firmly; then the two faces, one dark, one fair, met in the kiss of fellowship and goodwill.

"I will do everything that I can to help you, only don't show by look or gesture that we are anything but nurse and patient. I will appear to do all that Sir Cyprian tells me, and keep our secret knowledge to ourselves. It will never do to let him find out that we are friends."

"How did you come here?" Marcella said thoughtfully. "Tell me who sent for you, or brought you to the Court?"

Lottie hesitated, then answered: "Sir Cyprian wrote to my father and asked whether I could come to look after you. I was just home from London, and although not fit for much, having had an accident," she laughed suddenly, a harsh bitter note, "I came on straight here, where I was told a young lady suffering from hallucinations was ill, and that I was to keep her quiet and listen to nothing she might say, as she was not in her right mind. Will you promise to do all I tell you, and not to question anything, dear?" she went on earnestly. "Believe me, I can and will help you to the best of my ability."

Marcella put her hand in that of the other girl. "I promise," she began, when the door was suddenly opened, and Sir Cyprian entered the room. His face was unchanged, save for one or two lines that had been added to those already round his mouth and eyes. They gave him an older look, and in his eyes themselves there was a furtive gleam as though he were on the alert for a sudden surprise. But his voice was soft and his smile gentle, as, after one flashing glance from the nurse to his daughter, he said:

"Is she taking her medicine, nurse?"

"She has only just woke up," Lottie said politely. "I have, however, given her the medicine," and she looked swiftly at Marcella; a glance the girl in the bed replied to with the slightest flicker of her long lashes.

Sir Cyprian smiled and approached the side of the bed, his blue, steely eyes shining with satisfaction. "I hope you are a good girl, Marcella, my dear," he said softly, placing one white hand on the silent girl's shoulder, beneath which she shrank as from a poisonous animal. He saw the gesture and pressed his hand more firmly on her shoulder. "You are going to be good now, Marcella?" he repeated.

"I am sure she will, Sir Cyprian," murmured the young nurse politely. "She is a little drowsy now, perhaps it is the medicine."

He started slightly and fixed his cold eyes on the fair, thin face of the girl he had secured as nurse. But it was a blank, and a satisfied smile rose to his lips. "That is well," he said slowly; "see that the medicine is given three times a day, and come to me as soon as more is required. Dr. Winter is in attendance also, but he has gone out on an errand." He moved to the door, after having stroked the shoulder of the apathetic girl once again. "Nurse, I wish to speak to you outside; I won't keep you waiting long."

Lottie followed him silently.

"Well," she said curtly, "what is it? I must get back to my patient soon."

"I want to tell you this, my dear young lady," he said, holding her arm tightly. "That if I discover you don't play straight by me, you will find it difficult to avoid a little unpleasantness for yourself. Remember, you were saved from a suicide's grave; if that fact leaked out, you might be the recipient of attentions not quite free from embarrassment—you understand?"

While he had been speaking, a strange, enigmatic smile flitted across the girl's pale, worn face, but her voice was well under control when she answered him.

"Yes, I understand, Sir Cyprian. You may depend upon me to do my duty, and I thank you for your warning," she added quietly. "I shall not forget it."

He smiled and touched her cheek caressingly. "You are a very nice little girl, but you need watching. If the truth were known perhaps you could throw some light on the subject of the missing inmate of Water Grange?"

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With the assurance of a trained actress Lottie raised her eyes to his. Her face had not changed colour, and her voice was quite steady as she said: "I was there for a few days only; I know nothing of a missing inmate. Was there one?"

Sir Cyprian bit his lip angrily. It annoyed him that he had betrayed himself to the quiet, self-possessed girl who was evidently in the dark. But his voice was light and careless as he replied: "Perhaps I was misinformed, after all. However, go back to your charge now, and see that she does not escape from her room. I want her well looked after."

As he moved away Deacon came up to him, and Lottie heard the servant say: "If you please, sir, there is a gentleman in the library who wants to see you on important business."

For an instant the Baronet's face changed its colour, and his eyes flashed a questioning glance into those of his servant. The man interpreted the unspoken question and answered: "The gentleman did not give me his card, sir, but his name is Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, sir."

The baronet breathed gently, and his face relaxed from the sudden tension that had seized it. He went down the stairs thoughtfully, and Lottie gazed after him with a set expression on her weary face. She had heard the name of the millionaire before. He was the man who had made Edward Day his secretary; she had found that out some time ago. Why had he called?

She went into the bedroom. Marcella was sitting up in bed, her eyes fixed on the door. "Who is that?" she whispered. "I heard Deacon's voice saying someone had called. Can it be—oh, can it possibly be Philip Nullius?"

Lottie shook her head. "I think not—I heard the man say it was Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, the millionaire."

Marcella sprang up excitedly. "Mr. Johnson!" she exclaimed excitedly. "I wonder why he has called. What has brought him to the Court? Lottie, come here, I want to tell you something—you can help me now if you will."

FORTY-SECOND CHAPTER.

An Unknown Champion.

Sir Cyprian closed the door behind him, and approached the millionaire with outstretched hand, and a smile of genial good-humour. "This is indeed a pleasure, Mr. Johnson. Have you come from Lady Violet?"

Mr. Johnson looked at him thoughtfully. This man with the youthful face and sparkling eyes both interested and repelled him at the same time. This was the man who for long years had enjoyed the money and position that by right were another's. But whether the baronet was ignorant of the fact was a matter that Mr. Johnson had not decided in his own mind, and which he had determined to find out. But firstly he delivered himself of Lady Violet's message. "Yes," he answered civilly, "I have come from my wife, and she desires me to say that she would like you to allow me to take Marcella back with me; she is very fond of her, and has been much worried lately at not hearing from her."

"Ah!" Sir Cyprian rubbed his soft white hands together with a pleased smile. "Is that so? It is really very good of my dear sister-in-law to take so much interest in my daughter. Marcella is also very devoted to her aunt—very, in fact," he laughed softly, "I am almost jealous sometimes, Mr. Johnson, of the affection that exists between them."

Mr. Johnson made an impatient gesture. He saw through the affectation of the man and it disgusted him. "Then in that case, Sir Cyprian," he said civilly, "you will have no objection to letting Marcella return with me to town? We will look after her well."

Sir Cyprian sighed regretfully. "If you had only come a few days ago how pleased I would have been to let Marcella accompany you, but while I was in town the last time I made arrangements for her to go to some friends of mine in the country, and she left yesterday. I am so sorry this has happened."

"What is her address?" the other man said brusquely.

(Continued overleaf.)

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He was annoyed that he had once again arrived too late on another quest for the woman he loved.

The baronet smiled; he was enjoying himself hugely. He had always hated the big successful City magnate, whose path seemed one continuous stretch of gold, and he hated him the more since by making the woman whom he had for years kept under his thumb rich and independent of him, she was no longer his slave to sway to the dictation of his commands, to force to his superior will, and to dictate his own terms to as in the days before she had met the millionaire, Caleb J. Johnson. And for all the power he had lost, he hated more intensely the stranger who had robbed him of it. He rejoiced to be in the position to hurl a shaft at the head of the man, whose wealth, compared with his own, was as a vast, unfathomable ocean to a shallow pond; and he owed the millionaire one for having attempted to interfere with his plans some time ago. He had vowed to get his own back, one day, and that day had arrived earlier than he had anticipated.

"I am glad to be able to give you her address," he said slowly, "because Violet may like to write her at once. It is c.o. E. Haste, Esq., Water Grange, Berks."

"Water Grange!" the millionaire started and looked at him in amazement.

Sir Cyprian smiled. "Yes; do you know it? You appeared as though the name were not an unknown one to you."

Mr. Johnson reddened slightly. The note of mockery in Sir Cyprian's voice galled him. He felt that he had placed himself at a disadvantage in having betrayed his acquaintance with the name. He returned the baronet's gaze, however, with one as cool. "No, not that I can remember, but the name struck me as being uncommon. So you are keeping Marcella there! For any length of time?"

"Until she is better; the doctor feared that her nervous system was in danger of collapsing, but the fresh surroundings will do her good." Then, before Mr. Johnson could make any comment, he went on suavely: "I trust that you have received news of your famous picture. It must be vexing to know that all this trouble is in vain. I remember Marcella mentioning how you prized it."

"Yes," the other returned absently. "It is vexing, but the last bulletin from Scotland Yard was more reassuring. They have traced a man whom they have been watching in London to the country, and though they are not sure, they fancy he is connected with the theft in some way."

Sir Cyprian laughed. "Ah, that is most interesting! May I inquire what their waiting has brought forth? Is the man well-known to the police, or just a suspicious character who really may be quite harmless and innocent of all evil?"

"I don't know much more now than I have already told you," the millionaire replied curtly; he wanted to get away, to tell his wife that he had failed a second time in fulfilling her commands.

"Not even the fellow's description? That is always so interesting, I think," Sir Cyprian laughed lightly.

"I believe that the man the police are searching for is this wonderful 'King of Spades,'" Mr. Johnson answered. "They say he has a black beard of a peculiar shape, and is of a dark type."

Sir Cyprian shivered. "It is to be hoped that they will bring such outlaws to justice. It is dreadful that they should be at large like this; but won't you stay and lunch with me, Mr. Johnson?" he said genially.

The millionaire shook his head. He was beginning to hate his wife's brother-in-law more and more, and could not resist a thrust at him that would ease his feelings, and assure him on a certain point.

"I am afraid my time is not my own to-day, otherwise I would be delighted. By the way, what a beautiful old place this is! You inherited it after the old Sir Basil Wingate died, did you not?"

"Yes," the baronet answered carelessly. "He left an absurd will, cutting off his daughter, my cousin Helen, and her offspring because she ran away with some scamp of an adventurer. So it was just as well there was no child born to her."

"How do you know there was not?" Mr. Johnson said quickly.

Sir Cyprian shrugged his shoulders. "Because, although I was the heir I did not wish either my cousin or her children to suffer through her father's eccentricity, so I had every search made to ascertain what became of her, and heard she died in Australia childless. I was prepared to make a handsome allowance to them," he finished benevolently.

Mr. Johnson looked at him, a slow sarcastic smile curving his large mouth. "I am sure you are a very good man, Sir Cyprian, to take so much interest in the poor and needy. By the way," he added abruptly, "have you seen anything of that curate, Philip Nullius?"

Sir Cyprian raised his eyebrows in surprise. The sudden jump from one subject to another was disconcerting, but he answered politely. "I hear he is still on a holiday; I knew he had gone, because I offered him some introductions, but one fell through and I heard no more. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have some knowledge of that young man's parentage," the millionaire said slowly. "I want to see him put right in the world; he is worth it."

Sir Cyprian's fair skin paled suddenly. What did this blustering milloniare know of the secret of Philip Nullius? Why should he have sprung it so suddenly upon him? Surely he could not know that Philip Nullius was the son of his cousin, Helen Jerningham! Impossible—only he knew that, and he had resolved that the secret would die with him and perhaps the curate also. But in spite of the change of colour he laughed hardily. "Oh, well, I don't set much store on the birth of foundlings! They all claim to be heirs to peerages and similar nonsense. I heard my sister-in-law say the other day that Edward—the boy she had adopted—was a waif in reality; so mysteries can't well be wrapped round them all."

"Edward!" The millionaire started as though he had been struck. It was but a coincidence, of course, but an odd one. And he had forgotten that his wife had ever mentioned the fact about Edward Day—the rogue and blackmailer! Then his thoughts flew to the memory of Philip Nullius' face, and he rejoiced that there was not the slightest doubt about *him*. He, at least, was genuine. He turned to Sir Cyprian. "I am glad you say that Philip Nulluis is away; I heard that he had returned here the other day to see Marcella."

Sir Cyprian's face grew livid. "Who told you that? I mean how do you know that he has returned? I was away and did not see him; I was not even aware that he had returned from his holiday."

"No?" queried the millionaire drily. "I thought that perhaps he had gone back to Water Grange!"

"What do you mean? Do you intend any insinuations concerning that beggarly curate?" Sir Cyprian said haughtily. "My only objection to him was that of not having the position or money upon which to support a wife such as my daughter Marcella; otherwise I am indifferent to the young man."

Mr. Johnson wheeled round suddenly. "Then why did you take so much trouble to have his rooms searched by your menials for the papers he possessed when living near Water Grange?" he said fiercely. "They were not found, and you were disturbed by it! How do you account for that?"

A swift expression of mingled fear and hate crossed Sir Cyprian's face, but the next moment he laughed softly. "Really, Mr. Johnson, you surprise me by the interest you take in that young curate. Since you must know, I was certainly anxious to get possession of the love letters my misguided daughter had written him; of other papers I am in ignorance that he possessed any! You seem better informed than myself, Mr. Johnson." he said mockingly.

The millionaire bit his lip. "Perhaps I do," he said shortly, "more than you think, Sir Cyprian. But I won't trespass on your time now; I will go and call upon Marcella at Water Grange. Good-day."

The door closed before Sir Cyprian could retort. He ground his teeth savagely. "Confound you, you moneyed upstart. So you fancy you have got on a trail, do you, and you mean to thwart my plans, queer my pitch! That woman

(Continued on page 318.)

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shall pay the penalty; she shall fall with me—roll in the mud as well. But I shall not be defeated yet; there is nothing that fellow can trace to me. It is only supposition, after all, but how did he learn about Water Grange? How know about the papers in the room?" He took one or two impatient steps down the room, his smooth brow furrowed by a deep line of thought. Things had not gone as he had planned for a long time. Failure had dogged his intentions regarding the curate; twice had he evaded the trap that had been laid for him. Sir Cyprian could not help thinking that the hands that had saved him had been those of women. Woman's instinct was so much more alert and ready to act than a man's, and on each occasion Sir Cyprian saw the trail of the feminine instinct.

"I must stop him from knowing any more; how can I manage it, I wonder? The curate has disappeared again; he is sure to be in London, probably trying to ferret out something about his compulsory imprisonment."

He turned to the table and picked up one or two letters that had just arrived, and which he had taken from the post-bag. One was from Edward Day saying he would be calling during the week, as he was leaving London. Sir Cyprian smiled. "Ah, a good idea, I will use him to bait the other with! He is ambitious and unprincipled; he will fall in with my plans, especially as I shall offer him a very good prize. Better far that she should marry Edward Day than Philip Nullius. I will hold what I have held a little longer." He laughed again. "So Mr. Johnson anticipates bringing to justice the 'King of Spades.' I hope he will; I should like to see him in the dock—a place as yet new to him, I should fancy." Then, with another laugh, he sat down and took up his pen.

In the meantime, Mr. Johnson was waiting at the station for the up-train to London. A boy brushed past him, and when he turned to utter a sharp protest, he saw something lying at his feet. It was an envelope; he picked it up, then the train steamed into the station and he secured his carriage. When it started he opened the letter curiously. Inside was a sheet of paper, on it were the words:

"*Philip Nullius gone to London. Marcella is ill at Court. Don't trust Sir Cyprian; stay away from Court if you wish to help Marcella.*"

Mr. Johnson folded up the scrap of paper with a sudden smile. He had almost believed at first that Marcella was at Water Grange, so straightforward had Sir Cyprian seemed to be, but now this letter proved two things—first, that Marcella was being kept from her aunt for some purpose of her father's, and secondly that there was one person in that strange household a friend to the imprisoned girl.

"She will be fairly safe for a few days," the millionaire muttered. "Now to report myself to my wife, and then"—his voice softened—"and then to look for my son—my boy."

FORTY-THIRD CHAPTER.
The Stab in the Dark.

When the millionaire reached Lady Violet's house in Grosvenor Square, he was shown immediately into her presence, and, when he saw her, fell back in amazement. So pale, wan-eyed, and tragic she looked, that he guessed something had happened out of the common to make her, the Society leader, careless of her appearance. He took a step towards her.

"Violet, you are ill; what does it mean, this dreadful change in you?"

"Stop!" She waved him off passionately. "Don't come any nearer, Caleb. I—I—want to tell you something—to ask you something—you must, you shall tell me the truth."

"What is it?" he said dully. He knew that she had learnt something—something perhaps of the deceit he had practised upon her—but how much only Heaven knew.

"When you had left me the other day," she said slowly, speaking with difficulty. "I received the following letter. It told me much that had puzzled me in the past, and also showed me that the man I had imagined a man of honour was but a poor, pitiful creature, not fit for a woman's confidence or respect."

He took the letter from her. It was short and to the point.

"*If Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox were to ascertain where the body of her first husband is, she would learn that it was only his clothes that were thrown into the river—his body having been seen on board a ship in the full possession of health and a thousand pounds paid him for his silence and the promise to keep out of England. The thousand pounds was the price that was paid by her second husband, Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, for the privilege of marrying her, he having held over Major Frayne-Lennox's head the threat to use a certain dishonoured cheque that has come into his possession. Lady Frayne-Lennox is congratulated on her second marriage.*"

The face of the millionaire, Caleb J. Johnson, grew livid, and a sarcastic smile touched his lips, as he turned to the woman whom his deceit had made a bigamist. "So you chose to listen to this anonymous correspondence, rather than ignore the letter as a mad bit of spleen on the part of a man who hates me—and perhaps you also?"

She put her hand on his arm and gazed steadily into his face. "Caleb, I thought you were at least man enough to own up when you have done wrong. I can see through all this pretence, and it hurts me more than what you did. But, oh," she wailed, "why did you do such a thing—why did you commit such a wrong?"

He looked at her, a bitterly sad expression in his eyes. "Because all my life, Violet, I have let nothing stand in the way of my getting what I wanted, no matter what it was—gold, power, or love; whatever barrier stood between me and my desire I broke down through sheer force of will. I have done several shady actions in my life, of all of which now I am heartily ashamed, and wish I could wipe them out—I have wronged the dead, trampled on the weak, and——"

"And me," she cried, "you have wronged me, the woman you married, more than all."

He raised his hand suddenly and grasped her arm. "No, Violet, after all I have wronged you least of all; I put away from you the presence of a dissolute man you hated, and who was but a drag on you; I have made you my wife in name only—I sinned this time for love, like any hot-headed boy, but in all else I have done my best to make the reparation I could, Violet. Only a few knew of the form of marriage through which we went—we can drop out of each other's lives if you like, when I have done my duty."

"What duty? What do you mean?"

"I have a task before me—one just begun, and which I have neglected long enough. I will put that right, and then—"

"Yes," she whispered, awed by the look on his face she had never seen before. "What will you do then, Caleb?"

He smiled wearily. "I will put myself out of your life as ruthlessly as I entered it. I think I know the villain who sent this anonymous document to you—and"—his eyes suddenly flamed with fire—"and he shall pay for his act."

She caught his arm in hers. "No, no! Caleb, no violence! Nothing like that; promise me! I—I—was naturally horrified at first, but I will try to forgive you. We must part, but let us at least part friends, without bad blood between us, or the wreaking of vengeance on others!"

He took her hands in his and crushed them until she nearly cried aloud. "Violet, I will try to do your bidding, but tell me; if that man—you know whom—were to be really dead one day, would you marry me again? Would you be my wife in very truth?"

A slow flush coloured her cheeks as she answered. "Should you bring me news that the man had really died, I think, perhaps, that I would marry you again."

He bent over her hands and kissed them reverently.

"Let me tell you now," cried Lady Violet, "while we are both natural, and speaking as soul to soul, I once committed the most unnatural act in the world. I am a bad woman, Caleb, I let my own child——"

She stopped suddenly. The door had been flung open and a man was announced.

He came forward slowly

Then Caleb J. Johnson spoke, and his voice thrilled both his hearers; it was so full of suppressed emotion and feeling:

"It's Philip," he cried, "it's Philip Nullius!"

(Another grand instalment of this serial next week.)

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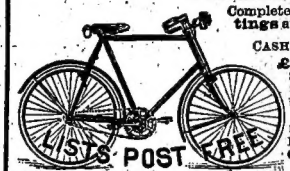

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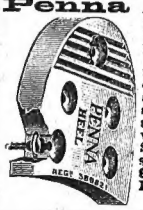

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Unwelcome Attention.

"I WAS introduced to a man some time ago," writes "EDITH," "but at the time took rather a dislike to him. I thought he seemed rather as though he might be given to drink. Well, this man seems to have taken a very great fancy to me. He never misses an opportunity of speaking to me, and often crosses the street with a view of meeting me. In fact, he is getting rather more pressing than I like. As he was introduced to me by a very dear friend, I cannot be rude to him. What should I do?"

* * * * *

You will lose nothing by being polite to him always. In fact, I think continued politeness is often the very best cure for such attentions. There is no better way of showing a man that you do not care for him than by always being polite. Try it for six months. If this does not have the desired effect, write to me again, and I will prescribe something else.

A Lax Lover.

"WE have been engaged two years," writes "WORRIED," "but so far my lover has not yet said anything definite about our getting married. When he proposed, he was not very well off, and I do not think his position has improved much since. Ought I not to ask him about it, as my family often talk about the matter, and other girls tease me."

* * * * *

It must depend on your lover's position. When he proposed to you, did he not give you some idea of his prospects? Have they improved as much as he expected? And, do you think he has been making serious efforts to place himself in a position to marry? Think it well over before you speak to him. If you do not think he has worked hard enough, and is not seriously trying to improve matters, then you should certainly raise the question.

Beginning Young.

"LOVER." So you are seventeen, and very fond of girls. You want one all to yourself, but are so shy that you have not the courage to speak to them. At the same time, you say you like reading this page very much. Well, I am glad to hear that, but I hope you have not taken it into your head that because other people fall in love very young, you, too, must do the same? At seventeen there is no need whatever for you to start sweethearting. In fact, I think it would be much better if you turned your mind to something likely to help you in life. Instead of casting about to find a girl, you should just wait until you see one who really attracts you, for whom you feel you would do anything. Don't run away with the idea that you must go sweethearting, as though it were necessary for your health. If you are of a loving turn of mind you will soon enough find the girl who attracts you, and who at the same time will be attracted by you.

A Case for Waiting.

"RONALD."—Yes, you would be doing wrong in taking your sweetheart from a good home in order to marry her, when your salary is only one pound a week. Wait until you are in a better position, unless, of course, your wife is able in any way to earn something at home. Certainly it would not be wise for her to go out to work after you are married, seeing that she has not done so before. No, "RONALD," I fear you must do what a *lot* of others have to, and that is to wait.

Marrying Beneath Him.

WHAT a long letter you have written me, "UNFORTUNATE"! I gather that you are very much in love with a girl who is rather beneath you in social position, and that, while her parents approve of you, your parents do not approve of her. Further, that it would break your hearts to separate. You are nineteen, she is eighteen.

* * * * *

Well, why be in such a hurry about it? I suppose you do not think of getting married for some years yet. It would be very foolish if you did. Why not decide to wait three years? If, after that time, you are still as fond of each other as ever, and your position enables you to marry, then surely your parents will not object simply because of the difference in social position. It is a very old-fashioned idea that people should only marry those of their own exact standing, for everybody nowadays is educated, and if a girl is able to bear herself as a lady, the man who rejected her because of trifling differences in position would indeed be a snob. I advise you to wait until you are older and better able to make up your mind as to whether you love the girl sufficiently to marry her without the consent of your parents.

On Taking Your Sweetheart to Dances.

"W.P." asks if it is correct for him to take his *fiancée* to dances. He has not done so as yet, because he hates the idea of her dancing with other men, and does not see how he could avoid such a thing. Could he take her, and arrange to dance all the dances with her alone? The girl is herself very much concerned because "W. P." has not as yet taken her to dances, while he has gone to them himself.

* * * * *

What a one-sided sort of man you are, "W. P."! You go regularly to dances yourself and dance, I suppose, with all sorts of other girls. Yet you are terrified to take your own sweetheart for fear she might dance with other men. Well, well! If she trusts you not to flirt too much, cannot you trust her? Do you not think she loves you sufficiently to be true to you, and yet have the enjoyment of dancing? And, as a matter of fact, "W. P.," dance-flirtations are as a rule dull affairs, and I don't think many hearts are stolen by them. It would be very bad manners to dance all the time with your own girl, if you should take her.

Money Presents.

"I AM to be married soon," writes "MABEL," "and a well-to-do relative asked me the other day what I would like for a wedding present. I did not tell him at the time, saying I would think it over. Meanwhile, I wish to ask your advice. I have not told this relative, but the fact is, my *fiancé* is none too well off. In fact, what we should most like would be a present of money. Do you think my relative would be offended if I hinted that a cheque would be the most acceptable present?"

* * * * *

It is quite usual for relatives to give cheques as their wedding presents to young couples. Without actually asking him for a money present, you could quite easily hint to him that the funds are not so high as they might be, and then, no doubt, he will do the necessary thing.

Cynthia

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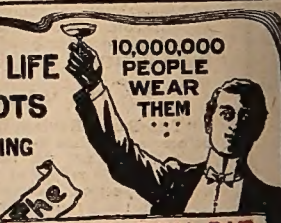

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